The Two Vivians

THE TWO VIVIENS

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"BEYOND PARDON," "ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE,"
"MARRIED FOR HER BEAUTY," "A WOMAN'S TEMPTATION,"
"LOVE WORKS WONDERS," ETC.

LONDON
ROBERT HAYES, LTD.
ROSEBERY HOUSE, BREAMS BUILDINGS, E.C. 4

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY JARROLD AND SONS LTD. NORWICH

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THE TWO VIVIENS

CHAPTER I

HOME AGAIN

A YOUNG man was standing in the hallway of the Dudley Arms Hotel, talking to the spruce little clerk. He had a half-smoked cigar between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, and there was a reminiscent light in his dark eyes.

"You have been here a long time, Mr. Spriggs," he remarked. "And the last twelve years appear to have passed lightly with you."

"You know my name?" exclaimed the clerk, well pleased. "And yet I don't seem to remember you."

He glanced at the register to refresh his memory, and murmured—

"Mr. Bryan Endicott. H'm!"

The young fellow turned upon him with a quizzical look and smile.

"Fifteen or sixteen years ago I was one of your pet aversions," he laughed. "The old Grammar School boys are not matched nowadays for mischief. Is Mr. Lennox still classical master at King Edward's?"

"Oh, no, sir. He died suddenly nine or ten years since."

Bryan sighed regretfully.

"I should like to have seen him once more," he said. Then he thought, "And his daughter Vivien —my good fairy of those happy days. I wonder what

has become of her? We were sweethearts then, and I believed that if I lost her it would break my heart." He smiled at the remembrance. "And when the crash came I straightway forgot all about her. She was a marvellously pretty child, with a saintliness of face such as Milton loved to dwell upon—at least that was what my youthful fancy painted her."

A new arrival bustled up to the clerk, and Bryan sauntered into the High Street of the old town. He walked in the direction of the castle, pausing now and then to note familiar landmarks so dear to his boyhood days.

Just as he was entering the castle grounds he met a white-haired old gentleman, with a ruddy face, and a still merry blue eye.

"Mr. Heathcote," exclaimed Bryan.

The old gentleman pulled up short, and smiled.

"My name is Heathcote, but I don't know you, sir."

"Endicott—Bryan Endicott."

The old gentleman examined him from head to toe.

"Never, sir. You are a fraud," he said, albeit there was a twinkle in his eyes. "Can this be little Bryan? Why, you look nearly forty, and my Bryan Endicott can't be thirty yet. Now, where on earth have you sprung from?"

"I arrived here last night," Bryan laughed, "after an absence of twelve years. You remember why I left school, and went away?"

"Yes, boy, every detail is still fresh in my mind. Don't refer to anything so painful, please. Tell me about yourself, and don't shake my hand off. What time is it? Eleven—I can spare half an hour, then I am going to my solicitor to settle some contracts, but, of course, you will come to Brookdale to dinner this

evening. I know that Dolly will be delighted. You haven't forgotten Dolly, have you ? "

" How could I forget Dolly ? We used to quarrel every time we saw each other. She had a fine temper of her own as a girl. She is married, of course ? "

" Of course she is not married. Can't find a fellow to please her, and I tell her she is fairly on the shelf. Take my arm, and we'll have a stroll in the castle grounds. Just thirty minutes, and no longer."

" And Jack ? " Bryan asked. " I hope that he has turned out well ? "

" And why not ? " laughed Mr. Heathcote. " Ah, he was a sad rogue as a boy. You and he had reputations black enough to hang the pair of you. Jack is a barrister, and making a name for himself. We shall have him in Parliament before very long, if it costs me a fortune. I am very proud of my scapegrace. He's in London, but comes home once a week. Now about yourself, Bryan, you headstrong fire-eater."

Bryan flushed under his bronzed skin, and a shadow flitted across his face.

" I never did like playing with facts, Mr. Heathcote," he said, slowly, " and you know why I disappeared."

" It was hard upon you, boy ; but why did you not come to me first ? I felt that very much. You could not help your father's faults. He was reckless, good-natured, and perhaps a little bit mad—there's no question about that. Drink, gambling, and false friends—the result was inevitable. But you have one satisfaction, Bryan—one glorious satisfaction ; every creditor was paid in full after your father's tragic end, and the worst that any man could say about him was to call him a fool. The old house, the works, everything was swept away, and a few hundreds only belonged to you——"

"Exactly one hundred pounds were given to me by Mr. Lucas Starkey, and he advised me to light out. I didn't want much advice, either. My spirit was galled. I could not endure pity, and I hated to meet those who had known me as the rich ironmaster's heir. I was only eighteen than, and boys are fanciful and sensitive. I swore over my father's grave that I would never come back again until I was a rich man, and that I would shame those who had heaped contempt and shame on his memory. I think I hated everybody then."

"Poor boy. But Lawyer Starkey! By gad, sir, that man's a thief—a veritable leper among his friends. He seized nearly half the estate upon bills which he claimed had been renewed from time to time. We did not doubt him then, but since——" he shrugged his shoulders. "And he only gave you a hundred? Why, I know, and can prove, that he held at least treble that sum."

"It doesn't matter now," said Bryan, brightly. "I have come home again, and heaven alone knows the joy my home-coming is to me. I harbour no ill-feeling towards any man. I left England under an assumed name, and I have done well in the States. I have worked pretty hard, both with hands and brains, and the fame of Frank Tynan has, I dare say, got here in front of me."

Mr. Heathcote swung round, and stared at Bryan, a half incredulous light in his eyes.

"Are you poking fun at me, boy?"

"No, sir; I am Frank Tynan, the not unknown inventor, and I am proud of that other name of mine. I have no belief in your clever man who has no belief in his own importance. I went to the States, friendless and unknown, but I had plenty of confidence. Your

diffident man is useless out there. I soon learned, even against my will at first, the market value of a little bluff and bounce, discreetly used. I was greeted with open arms by men who have no use for experience. I put on workman's togs, and studied practical engineering in all its branches. We were not allowed to follow any pattern out there, but to improve upon the best that the old country could produce. I have made a name and a fortune, and I am under thirty years of age. I have come home to buy back the old works, if I can, and to revolutionize the antiquated system that governs production here."

Mr. Heathcote listened amazed—almost appalled.

"Starkey is now the owner of the old ironworks," he said, slowly, "and I am in business yet. Do you want to ruin me and the others, you Colossus?"

"I am here for a purpose, Mr. Heathcote, and that purpose I shall pursue relentlessly for my country's good," was the dogged answer. "And I must ask you to respect the confidence I have reposed in you. I am Bryan Endicott—home once more. Ah, how lovely these blue English skies are, the fleecy clouds, and the soft, sweet air of spring. Ours is the only country that has a proper spring. It's just glorious."

"Yes, no doubt," murmured Mr. Heathcote, "but we shall have to talk this over, and go into partnership, otherwise your return to Dudley will not be an unmixed blessing. I am an old man—nearly seventy—and the firm wants some young blood in it—Heathcote and Endicott—a splendid conjunction. The old name shall not go into oblivion."

Bryan smiled.

"I am not averse to it, Mr. Heathcote," he said, gently. "You were good to my father, and to me, but I want the works which should have been mine, too."

" Perfectly natural, but I am afraid that Starkey will not sell. He got them by fraud, and he'll hang on to 'em, until he's starved out. Call upon him, and see what you can do."

He looked at his watch impatiently.

" I'll throw up this appointment ; I must not lose sight of you. I am overwhelmed. Hang it, boy, who would have thought it of you ? A few years since you were a rackety kid in an Eton jacket, and now you are a commercial terror to a man of my years and experience. Want to be rid of me ? All right, I will go to my lawyer, but my heart is taken out of everything. Give me your hand, and promise to come to Brookdale this evening, or earlier if you can. No ceremony, Bryan, only Dolly and me. Then we can talk things over, and in the meantime, endeavour to have a chat with Starkey. He still has an office over the bank."

" I will," Bryan answered.

The two men parted, and Mr. Heathcote looked after the stalwart figure of the young fellow.

" Good lord," he thought. " What a bolt from the blue ! And that is mad-brained Bryan Endicott. I must marry him to Dolly. It's the only safe thing to do under the circumstances."

CHAPTER II

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

BRYAN was glad to be alone for a while. He wanted to enjoy the glory of the May morning, and to re-visit nooks and glens of which he retained many a cherished memory.

How easy to imagine himself a boy again. The same golden sun was shining in the same blue sky; the scented air was vocal with the song of birds; and the soft spring air murmured through bush and briar just as softly and sweetly as it had done when he dreamt the daring dreams of boyhood while earth was still a fairyland.

He climbed the long stony hill to the courtyard, and sat down on a wooden seat at the foot of the crumbling tower. He had occupied the selfsame seat years ago, and amused himself by awaking the echoes. How often had he brought Vivien Lennox there to listen to his crude imitations of the farmyard sounds. He could not resist yelping like a dog, and laughing when echo answered sharp and shrill.

How this sort of thing used to amuse Vivien. These reflections awakened half regretful thoughts, and he wondered why he had been silent for so long.

"I have been a bit ungrateful towards my old friends," he thought, rather remorsefully. "And I was so fond of Vivien—dear little Vivien. Twelve years ago. She must be three or four and twenty now."

He had risen, and descended to the gravelled pathway in the centre of the courtyard. He walked along slowly to the further end, and passed under the great stone arch into a veritable fairy glade. To the right the huge trees formed a shadowy arcade, vocal with the melody of birds. To the left were undulating dales and glens, carpeted with turf centuries old.

He plunged among the trees with almost boyish eagerness. Every foot of the ground was familiar to him. At last he paused before a gnarled old oak which had braved a thousand years, and murmured, with a little catch in his voice—

"And this was our trysting place and letter-box. Well, the world has a good deal to give to a man, but it's nothing to what it gives to a child."

Some six feet from its base the great bole branched out into many limbs, and in the very centre was a deep hollow, where Bryan and Vivien had deposited the first little love letters they had written.

He poked his stick into the hollow, and a bird flew out with a wild scream of fright.

"Too bad," muttered Bryan. "I suppose you are nesting here, little bird,."

He dived his hand in, and brought out two tiny eggs, and a nest, then a mass of leaves, and finally a stained envelope.

A sharp exclamation broke from his lips, and he turned over the poor little envelope almost reverently. He recognized it as one of Vivien's, and in the blurred handwriting he deciphered his own name.

"It is almost like a message from the dead," he thought. "I wonder——"

He opened the envelope, and took out the letter. It was in fairly good preservation, though it had lain

in its hiding-place for some twelve years, and it read thus—

DEAREST BRYAN—I am so sorry about all the trouble, but you must not go away without seeing father and me. Father says that he has written to you, and he is sure that all will come right in the end. It is just seven horrid weeks since you were called home, and in all that long while I have only had one letter from you, and I have not seen you once. Only one little mile separates us, and yet you seem so far away. But you will answer this, won't you? And as father has invited you to our house on Sunday you will be sure to come. Oh, I shall wait so eagerly, and so anxiously.

Your little sweetheart
VIVIEN LENNOX

A lump rose in Bryan's throat, and his eyes grew dim. "Dear little Vivien," he said, pressing the damp, musty letter to his lips, "how badly I treated you!"

He carefully replaced the nest in the hollow tree, and turned away with the eloquent relic of child love in his hands. He read it over and over again, and then put it between the leaves of his pocket-book. The sombre woods, relieved by the sunshine that flashed across his path through the interlacing leaves above, the song of the birds, the music of the wind, all awakened a tenderness which had been slumbering in his breast for years.

He returned to the courtyard, and climbed to the top of the castle tower. From here he could view the surrounding country for mile after mile. He looked away over the tops of countless trees to an irregular line of black buildings, from which rose myriads of chimney stacks, some of them so tall that their summits were lost in the murky clouds which brooded under the blue sky. He listened, and heard

the far-away clang-clang of machinery, the intermittent throb of the steam hammers above the drone, and the faint hum of unresting labour. He singled out two of the huge smoke stacks, and muttered—

"The works that should have been mine—the works that shall be mine. I will see old Starkey to-day—yes, I'll go and see him now."

He descended the spiral stairway, and strode swiftly from the courtyard, and back to the castle gates. The attendant saluted in military fashion, and Bryan smiled.

"Baksheesh?" he asked, with a laugh, putting his hand into his pocket. The man started like an old war horse at the sound of the trumpet.

"I saw you pass in with Mr. Heathcote, sir, and I wondered if you were one of the old boys."

"You are still keeper of the gate, Cross?"

"And you are one of the old boys. I remember you now, Master Endicott—the greatest rip that ever worried a veteran of the Mutiny."

Bryan laughed.

"But you were well paid for it, Cross—cross by name and cross by nature. Well, and how are things faring with you? I am delighted to shake hands with you once more, and I suppose that I must not pass through the gate without paying the old baksheesh."

"Oh, don't say that, sir."

"You demanded it from the lads, and I've no doubt you do so now."

"Bah!" was the contemptuous rejoinder. "The boys nowadays are milksops. I haven't had a window broken for years, nor a drink at their expense, neither."

"Then you shall have one at mine. Here's something for you in memory of the old days."

The old soldier's face changed from purple to grey, and he gazed at the sovereign with curious intentness.

"It's all right, sir—forgive me. I was thinking of that time when you gave me a gilded sixpence, and I tried to pass it for half a sovereign. I had a fight over it with the landlord of the 'Blue Boy.'"

He carefully slipped the coin into a leather purse, and smacked his lips in anticipation.

"This is a godsend to me, sir, at the present time, and if I can do anything for you in my small way, I hope you'll command me."

"Thank you, Cross."

Bryan was about to add good morning and pass on, when a sudden thought flashed through his mind, and he asked—

"Of course you remember Mr. Lennox, who used to be the classical master at King Edward's?"

"Dead, sir, this many a year. He came into some money, and the shock killed him; a big pile it was, too."

"You surprise me, Cross. And Miss Lennox—what became of her?"

"That yellow-haired little thing? Bless me, she vanished at once, snapped up by some relations at Stourbridge—Tyldesley, I think their name is. I did hear at the time, because there was a rumpus among 'em. She was a child with money hanging to her, and everybody wanted her. Now I come to think of it, I believe she was married a little while back to a cousin. I saw something about it in the 'Dudley Herald.'"

"Very likely," Bryan answered, a chill striking at his heart. "Much obliged, Cross; I shall have to have a long chat with you next time I am this way,

as I am naturally curious about the people I used to know. Good morning."

He passed through the gate, and strode thoughtfully up the High Street. He was disappointed, and rather despondent. It was hard to relinquish that golden dream of the dear old days which had been so suddenly and so strangely brought back to him.

"I cannot grumble," he reflected. "After all, it was only a boy-and-girl affair, and for years I forgot my little sweetheart entirely. But I must see her once more, if only as an old playmate. Then I will burn the letter. Ashes to ashes. Confound it, I'm getting morbidly sentimental, and that's not the mood for a tussle with old Starkey."

CHAPTER III

MR. STARKEY'S CONFIDENCES

BRYAN gazed at a large clock face in a jeweller's window, and saw that it was half-past twelve.

"Yes, I will go on to Starkey's," he repeated. "I expect the man is as methodical as ever. He used to stick to his desk until two, except when he had to be in court. I have often heard dad say that he would break his rule for nothing but a chance to do somebody an ill turn."

He paused at the bank, and looked up at the first-floor window. Yes, Starkey's name was still there, minus one or two letters, and Bryan entered the building at a side door, and climbed the creaking stairs.

Mr. Starkey's offices occupied the whole of the floor, and were arranged so that his clients went in at one door, and out at another, when necessary.

Bryan entered the clerk's office, and was faced by a shabby old man, with a snub nose and watery eyes. There was a fringe of rusty hair about his temples, another of straggling grey round his chin. He looked mean, and he seemed to know it.

"Is Mr. Starkey in?" Bryan asked.

"Yes, sir, but he is engaged, I am sorry to say," answered the clerk, sadly.

"I can wait," said Bryan, going towards a chair that had not been dusted for a month.

"Allow me," exclaimed the clerk, apologetically,

wiping the seat with the tail of his shabby frock coat. "But I don't think it is much use waiting, sir."

"I don't hear voices in Mr. Starkey's office," Bryan said.

"No, no," stammered the clerk. "The fact is, sir, the governor is—ahem—very busy with an important document that has to be submitted to counsel to-day and has given me strict instructions that he is not to be disturbed."

At that moment the inner door opened, and Mr. Starkey himself stood on the threshold. He was a small man, with a large head and aggressive side-whiskers. He had a strong face, and small, keen, grey eyes, that twinkled suspiciously under heavy, black brows.

As far as Bryan remembered, he had not changed a hair since he parted from him at Liverpool twelve years before.

"Whom have you here, Lowe?" the lawyer asked, frowning fiercely at the clerk.

"I—I don't know, sir—I——"

"I have only just come in, Mr. Starkey," Bryan interrupted. "Can you spare me a few minutes?"

The lawyer's face changed, as if by magic, and he advanced with his right hand outstretched.

"How d'ye do, Endicott? What a monster you have grown. You've got a touch of the Yankee accent all right. Come into my office."

He turned to the astonished clerk and said—

"I am in to no one, Lowe."

Bryan followed him into the inner room, and they stared at each other for a full half minute without speaking.

"This is going to be a pretty tough handful," thought the lawyer.

"As big a scoundrel as ever," was Bryan's mental comment.

"Endicott, I can't express my delight at seeing you," said Mr. Starkey. Then he added, a little reproachfully—"But why on earth have you never written to me?"

"Nothing to write about," Bryan answered carelessly. "I thought it better to present myself in person at the proper time."

"Quixotic fellow," laughed the lawyer.

He turned to a sideboard, and took out a spirit case and a box of cigars.

"I will be frank with you, Endicott. I knew that you were in Dudley, and I expected this visit. I happened to look at a Liverpool paper, and saw a passenger list with your name in it. I then consulted the registers of each of the decent hotels—and here you are. Needless to say, I am delighted. Have a drop of whisky-and-soda. I am afraid I can't offer you a cocktail. You will lunch with me, won't you, unless you have made other arrangements?"

"I have not," replied Bryan, "but I have promised to dine with Mr. Heathcote this evening, and until then I am just renewing old acquaintanceship with persons and places."

"Exactly, then you shall go home with me. There will be just our two selves, for I am a bachelor still." He showed his big yellow teeth, and added, with an air of regret, "I am sorry that Heathcote and I are rather at loggerheads just now. He is, unhappily, a somewhat vindictive man."

He looked up at the curling rings of smoke from his cigar, and contracted his lips.

"Yes, he has never forgiven me for going into the

same business—I mean the ironworks which I bought from your poor father."

"Oh, yes. Well, I have come to England to relieve you of them," said Bryan, abruptly. "I presume you remember your promise?"

"Every word of it, Endicott, and I shall be glad to be quit of a bad bargain. I took over the works at a cost of twenty thousand pounds, because I was obliged to. What they have cost me since I dare hardly guess at now," he replied, shaking his head. "The machinery was out of date, and mismanagement was writ large everywhere. But we can't do better than a fair valuation by experts, and if you can put up the money, the place is yours."

"The money is perfectly safe," smiled Bryan.

"You have—pardon the question—er—financial assistance at command?"

"No."

"But, my dear sir," said Mr. Starkey, leaning forward in his chair, with his hands on the arms, and looking straight into Bryan's steady eyes, "I need hardly tell you that in a very considerable transaction such as the one you suggest, financial assistance would, I presume, in your case, be—er—well, what I might call an essential preliminary to the opening of negotiations."

"But I don't want any," said Bryan, quietly, but with a significant snap of the eyelids.

"Ah!"

Mr. Lucas Starkey could not think of anything else to say just at the moment.

"Yes," continued Bryan, after a sip at his whisky-and-soda. "The fact is, I propose to be my own financier."

"Bless my soul, you don't say so," exclaimed the

lawyer, with a visible start. "Then you must have been pretty lucky out yonder."

"I guess so. I suppose I could realise about half a million if I wanted to."

"Dollars?"

"No, pounds," replied Bryan, rising from his chair. "You have been frank with me, Mr. Starkey, and I will be frank with you. Allow me to introduce you to a new acquaintance—Frank Tynan."

Mr. Starkey gasped, and dropped back in his chair.

"What, Frank Tynan, the great engineer and inventor! You and he the same! Allow me to congratulate you, my dear sir. How modestly you take it. Why, my dear sir, you are rich and famous at thirty. The world is at your feet. I see, I see. You want to buy back the old place on purely sentimental grounds." He shrugged his shoulders. "And yet you are rich enough to settle down as an English country gentleman. That, my dear Endicott, has always been my highest ambition."

He rose, and opening a steel safe let into the wall, took out a private ledger. He made a few rapid mental calculations, and then put it back.

"Ah, yes, what were you saying? Your life's work has only just begun. Young, rich, and all the world before you. A favourite of the gods, if ever there was one. Well, well, the old story—the race to the swift, and the battle to the strong."

There was an apologetic tap on the door, and in obedience to a harsh "Well?" the sad-faced clerk appeared, and informed Mr. Starkey that his motor was waiting.

Within a few minutes they were being driven rapidly in the direction of Stourbridge, a town some five or six miles from Dudley.

"I have bought a little place out here," the lawyer explained. "Dudley has not improved since your time, my dear Endicott, and when the wind sets the wrong way we get the smoke and sulphur fumes from Tipton, until sometimes it is really difficult to breathe. Now I will tell you," he continued, with an apparent burst of confidence, "that I have decided upon my future course in life. I have made friends among the country people, and I may say—quite between ourselves, you understand—formed a certain connexion, which may possibly result in—er—a matrimonial alliance. I am not such a very old man yet, Endicott—only about the prime of life, as age goes nowadays," he continued, with a deprecatory motion of his right hand, "and when I am assured of county support, which this alliance will give me, I shall stand for Parliament for this division of Worcestershire. I need not tell you that many of the most distinguished men in the House have been, and are, lawyers; and for me, my profession, as a profession, has ceased to have any interest whatever."

Bryan listened, but his thoughts were far away. He wondered vaguely if Starkey had been misjudged. Was Mr. Heathcote prejudiced against him as a rival in trade?

Mr. Starkey had started as a solicitor twenty years before, in a very small way, and his business, to all outward appearance, had not flourished to any great extent. And yet, if he were not merely boasting, he must be a wealthy man.

"You are very quiet, my dear Endicott," he said, after a lengthy pause.

"Am I? You will get used to that; I am not a talkative man at any time, and now I am suffering from a sort of bewilderment. One minute I am trying

to realise the fact that I am really at home and the next I am wondering if I have ever been away. Twelve years don't seem to have made any change in the people or their surroundings. The policeman on yonder corner used to stand on the same spot, and in the same attitude, when I was a boy."

The lawyer laughed. He was beginning to regard Bryan Endicott as a mere dreamer. Certainly he had developed into a remarkable genius, and had become one of *the* men of the time, and this great endowment had probably dwarfed his other mental faculties, as was often the case, when faculties were rapidly developed.

"I shall not have much trouble with him," he thought. "He is simply bubbling over with foolish sentiment."

"I heard what you were saying about marriage, and all that, and I am sure that I wish you happiness and success."

Bryan sighed.

"Stourbridge is a pretty place, and the surrounding country is charming."

"I live at Red Hill, right through the town," answered Mr. Starkey.

Bryan soon saw that the lawyer was a man of importance in Stourbridge. As the motor whirled into the town, passers-by touched their hats, and the occupants of passing carriages and other motor cars greeted him with bows and smiles, and lifted hats.

"Do you happen to know a family named Tyldesley, living somewhere near here?" Bryan asked.

Mr. Starkey looked at him sharply.

"There are several families of that name. Why do you ask?"

"Just curiosity," laughed Bryan. "The name is familiar to me from the old days."

After another pause the lawyer said, rather dryly—

"It's rather remarkable that you should put that question, my dear Endicott. The Tyldesleys of the place are my nearest neighbours."

Bryan felt his face growing alternately hot and cold, and his heart was certainly beating a few strokes more to the minute.

"Perhaps I shall see Vivien," he thought. "And if I do, I shall hear something of the truth about her."

The town was left behind, and the vehicle had entered a narrow lane.

"Nearly home," said Mr. Starkey. "That is Tyldesley's place. You can see the house through the trees."

Bryan did not reply. He was looking with all his eyes at a girl standing on the lawn in front of the house. She was rather tall, but the exquisite lines of her figure, and her perfect pose, made her entirely admirable and desirable. Her thick coiled hair gleamed in the sunlight with the lustre of ripe corn.

Bryan gave a hoarse sort of gasp, and then shut his teeth.

"What the deuce is the matter with you, Endicott?" asked the lawyer.

"American dyspepsia, I'm afraid," he answered, with a well-simulated hiccough. "So this is your home," he added, as the car turned into a trimly kept drive.

"Yes. I have named it Coningsby, after one of Beaconsfield's books. I dare say you will be a bit surprised to find that I keep up an establishment like this. Yes, I can see it in your face," he laughed. "I have the shabbiest office in Dudley, and, I think, the

nicest house round Stourbridge. When you come to know what I really am, and what I intend to be, you won't wonder so much. After lunch we'll call on the Tyldesleys, and then I shall have the great privilege of introducing Mr. Frank Tynan, the great inventor of the century."

He chuckled, in a not altogether pleasant fashion, Bryan thought, and, for some unaccountable reason, he felt that he was approaching a new combination of circumstances out of which might arise some great crisis in his life.

CHAPTER IV

ENEMIES

BRYAN had not been long in Mr. Starkey's house when he found out that however he had made his money he had got excellent value for it, and that he had learnt the art of doing himself extremely well.

His house was solidly furnished, after the fashion of the Midlands, but it was comfortable, almost to the point of luxury. His servants evidently knew their work—and their master. His conservatories were filled with excellently chosen exotics, and the garden made just the kind of surrounding that such a house should have had.

"Try that claret, my dear Endicott," he said to his guest, at lunch, pushing the decanter towards him. "That's part of a special shipment that I got over from a friend of mine in Medoc. I think you'll find it a nice, light, sound wine. That will do, Johnson, you needn't wait," he continued, to his butler.

When they were alone, he continued—

"Of course, it would not be the slightest use for me to attempt to deceive you, Endicott, in any way, as to my present circumstances. You know my humble origin," he said, with a smile and a gesture which Uriah Heep might have envied, and which made his guest want to take him by the collar and kick him through the window on to his own lawn.

"All the same, I don't want the fact advertised to the world in general. The people about here, as you

understand—I mean those, of course, who are anybody—are a trifle sensitive on that subject, and I should not care for it to be known in certain quarters that I was the son of a journeyman carpenter, earning twenty-five shillings a week, and paying five of it for the cottage that I was born in. However, that's all over and done with now, and you see what I have achieved to."

"Yes," said Bryan, with perhaps less enthusiasm than his host expected, "you certainly seem to have got along wonderfully well, Mr. Starkey, and you have made yourself a most comfortable little nest here—a nest, which I presume, from what you said as we came along, you hope to have shared by a mate entirely suited to your—what shall I say?—present fortunes and future expectations. That's about it, isn't it?"

Although it by no means suited his plans to give Mr. Starkey any offence just then, Endicott was quite unable to keep all the sarcasm out of his voice, but what there was his host never noticed. Like all hard men, he had his soft side, and little knowing how far he was committing himself, he was bent on exposing it now.

"Yes, yes," he replied, filling his glass, and holding it up to the light, "that is it, Endicott—that is it. Until a year or so I confess that I had but one object in life. As you know, I was the son of a working man, and a poor one at that. As I fought and struggled and rose, as I worked my way from the parish school to the Grammar School, and from there to Mason's College—where I studied for my law examinations—I saw on every side that money meant power—the only power that nineteen out of every twenty men and women acknowledge.

"I saw, as you must have seen, that there are two elements in success, ability and opportunity. Neither of them is any good without the other. There are hundreds of geniuses starving now just because they have never had the right opportunity to make use of their brains. There are other hundreds of men, thousands perhaps, who have less brains than these, but who found their opportunity, and I am one of them."

"Yes," replied Bryan, after a sip at his wine, "I quite agree with you. As a matter of fact, that happened to myself. And now, having—as we say over on the other side—having made your pile, I suppose you find yourself in a position to moralize about the vanity of riches."

"Oh, come now, my boy," replied Starkey, with a somewhat too expressive smile, "don't be too severe. Remember, please, that you also have made your pile, as you call it, and therefore it is within the bounds of possibility that you might find yourself in the same position as myself, and you will be able to practically sympathize with me."

"I am afraid I don't quite follow you as far as that," replied Bryan. He did not tell his host that he was thinking of the golden-crowned, blue-eyed vision he had seen as they passed the garden next door. "I quite agree with you as to the purchasing power of money. I know just as well as you do that as long as you've got a sovereign, or a five-pound note, you can buy twenty or a hundred shillings' worth of human flesh and blood and brains, and when you've done with it, you can throw the refuse away, and have no more responsibility about it."

"And why should you have?" said Starkey, putting his right elbow on the table, and resting his

chin on his hand. "You have bought and paid for it, just as you would any other article of commerce. We are not all of us individual branches of the Charity Organization Society."

"Quite so," assented Bryan, "I thought you'd say that. It is just the difference between the old kind of slavery and the new."

"My dear sir, of course I know that you've come back from the most democratic country in the world, but I hope that you're not going to ask me to believe that there is anything like economical freedom in the United States of America, any more than there was in the old days of personal slavery. That is a strong saying, but I am talking of what I know.

"Yes, yes, I think I quite see what you mean now," continued Mr. Starkey "although I confess that I have never had the question put so strikingly before. Those iniquitous trusts and corners. Terrible! But, all the same, you must admit that under present conditions of employment as we have them in this country, our workers are free. They can engage themselves, and they can discharge themselves."

"Free," echoed Bryan, scornfully. "Yes, free to work for us who have the money to buy their labour, and use it as long as we want it, and then free to go and throw themselves on the human scrap-heap, as we do with our old iron, or go into the workhouse, which everybody, who has tried it, seems to think a great deal worse than prison. That, my dear sir, is what you call freedom."

"And what do you call it, Endicott?" asked his host, with one of his thin, long-drawn smiles.

"Slavery," replied Bryan, "and the worst kind of slavery at that. The slavery of wages, the slavery which means no human tie between employer and

employed, but just that money link which can be broken at any moment."

"Excellent, most excellent from a sentimental point of view, but you know that under present conditions there is only one way to fortune, and that is over the scrap-heap, as you call it, of the human refuse which we employ, and dispense with when we have done with it.

"But that is not exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. It is not altogether a pleasant sort of topic, and, as I may put it, it hardly goes with the walnuts and the wine. What I was going to say is this. Having assured to myself, after several years of hard work, what I may fairly call a competence, my outlook on life has naturally turned in a different direction."

"In other words," said Bryan as pleasantly as he could, "it is a case—well, not exactly what Tennyson said about the thoughts of the young man in the spring, but I suppose it comes to this, that you are thinking of reforming your bachelor ways, and settling down."

"Yes, yes," replied the lawyer, eyeing him keenly, as though he detected a note of sarcasm in his voice, "that is it. Of course, the quotation scarcely applies to myself, but you see, I am not quite fifty yet—not until next birthday, you know—and nowadays a man at fifty is just in the prime of life; in short, he is just as old as he feels, while a woman is always as old as she looks, however many birthdays she may have had."

"That is quite a truism," said Bryan, with a laugh which the lawyer did not quite like, "and I trust that, whether you have already made your choice or not, the lady will be duly sensible of the honour that you propose to do her. The wife of a man of such fortune

and position as yourself could hardly fail to be gratefully conscious of the honour. At the same time, if the lady is young and beautiful, as she doubtless will be, if she engages the affection of a man of such taste as yourself, it is possible that you may encounter a certain amount of opposition in the persons of—well, perhaps you will allow me to say, younger men."

The sarcasm in the last words was so obvious that Mr. Starkey's anger blazed up at once.

"Why don't you add 'and better looking,' while you're about it, Mr. Endicott?" he snarled. "That may be possible, but what do you suppose I care for the rivalry of a few young popinjays? Opposition? I love it. My whole life has been one continuous battle, and I have never known defeat yet."

The whole aspect of the man seemed changed. He was really in earnest, extravagant as his words seemed. His hard, keen eyes had softened; there was a flush on his thin, somewhat sallow cheeks, and his thin, almost foxy features seemed to have filled out, as though a quantity of new and generous blood had been introduced into his veins.

"Then it is much to be desired," replied Bryan, preserving his gravity with somewhat of an effort, "that since this is, I suppose, the most serious concern of your life, you will not find yourself faced with the opposition of anyone more strong or determined than yourself."

"Ah, in that case it would be a fight to the death."

Here spoke the original Starkey. His even, sharp-pointed teeth gleamed, and his aggressive side-whiskers seemed to bristle out.

"Bah!" he said, snapping his fingers. "Who dare oppose me here? They would be mere flies in the path of a lion," he laughed. "You see what an

opinion I have of myself. Diffidence and humility count as nothing in my assets."

"I quite believe you, and I am sure I wish you all the success that you deserve."

Truth to tell, Bryan was getting a little tired of the subject, and he perceptibly stifled a yawn.

His host took the hint, and led the way to the library.

"Now, my dear Endicott, unless you are otherwise engaged we will have a smoke and a talk—indeed, it would be as well to go into business matters at once, if you are agreeable. Don't think for one moment that I wish to force your hand. I believe that our interests are identical, and I am also looking for your influence and support in my new sphere of life. I know that you are going to dine with Heathcote this evening, but you cannot run in double harness with a man like that, a good fifty years behind his time."

"I am not anxious to run in harness with anybody unless it suits me to do so," was the rather brusque rejoinder. "Mr. Heathcote is an old friend of my family, and an honourable gentleman."

"Excellent," laughed Starkey. "I like to hear a man stick up for his friends, but Mr. Heathcote is no friend of mine, and so I keep a sharp eye on all his movements. You have returned—rich, famous, and he wants some young blood to bolster up his failing business. Are you a man to be influenced by sentiment? He has a daughter, too."

Bryan lit a cigar. All his hatred of the lawyer was returning, and while apparently cool, his blood was beginning to thrill with glow of coming battle.

"I must refuse to discuss Mr. Heathcote," he said icily. "My plans are made irrevocably. I am not exactly a dreamer, Mr. Starkey—or, rather, I am

not in the habit of dreaming vain dreams. I have a definite object in view, and I am prepared to spend the whole of my fortune in its realization."

Starkey's face brightened, and he nodded.

"Yes, yes, you want the old works back. It is only natural. No doubt you cherish the idea that they are haunted by generations of your ancestors." There was a covert sneer in his tones. "I promised that I would sell, and I will keep my word. They are rather a weight on my hands now, although the fact of being a large employer of labour greatly helps me in my political aspirations. I will not sell until after the election."

Bryan was silent for a while. He felt that the piercing eyes of the lawyer were trying to read his inmost thoughts.

"In the meantime we can fix the price, and have the agreement drafted. I cannot remain idle," he said, at last. "Let me be frank with you. I mean to have those ironworks, and on somewhat remarkable terms."

"But, Endicott, you are not buyer and seller, too," was the reply. The lawyer drummed his fingers on the table. "But I am agreeable to anything in reason. I do not agree with sentiment in business, and yet I am actually allowing it to outweigh the conviction of a lifetime. The works are yours for the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand pounds. I can say nothing fairer."

Bryan puffed at his cigar, and Starkey waited.

"I believe that the property was supposed to have cost you twenty thousand," the young man said, presently.

"But the improvements, the stock, the interest upon invested capital?"

"And the ghosts of my ancestors," sneered Bryan.

"Sentiment is playing a mighty big part in this business, Mr. Starkey. Don't interrupt me, please. I have come from a place where 'no' means 'no,' and 'yes' is 'yes,' and I have acquired the habit of speaking my mind. I am not a lawyer or a politician. I make you my offer here and now, and it is five thousand pounds over and above the valuation; so you get something for your unaccustomed sentiment, after all."

The lawyer's eyes dilated, and his eyelids quivered.

"I'm afraid that I must refuse to sell, Mr. Endicott," he said, slowly and decisively.

He looked slightly confused, and began to think that he had mistaken the measure of his man.

"It will make no difference in the end; Endicott's Ironworks will be Endicott's again in due course."

Bryan glanced at an elegant French clock on the mantelpiece.

"By Jove, I must be moving," he said. "I have to be at Heathcote's place by six, and it will soon be four o'clock."

"Put him off. You can wire."

"No, I gave my promise."

"You never break a promise, I suppose?" sneered Starkey.

"Never; I treat friend and foe alike in that respect."

"Remarkable young man! Well, if you must go, allow me to offer you the use of my car."

"Thanks—no; nothing at your hands just now, except the works."

"You are pleased to be jocular. Well, we'll agree to differ as friends."

He held out his hand.

"I cannot take it," Bryan said, coolly. "I am not built that way. If I am a man's enemy I let him know it at once. I am your enemy henceforth, Mr. Starkey, as you are mine."

He turned, and abruptly quitted the room. A moment later he had left the house, and was striding along the gravelled drive.

CHAPTER V

HIS OLD LOVE

"THE wolf—the avaricious wolf," Bryan muttered through his shut teeth, then the grim lines of his mouth relaxed, and he smiled. "I would rather have his enmity than his friendship, and if it is to be war between us, war let it be; my offer remains open for another week or two, no longer."

He shook the dust of Coningsby from his feet, and paused at the gate of the next house. Starkey had said this was the Tyldesleys', and Tyldesley was the name of Vivien Lennox's relatives. It was here, too, that he had caught a glimpse of the fair-faced girl with the sun-kissed yellow hair. She might be Vivien, and she might be somebody else. It would be better to know the truth at any rate.

He stood irresolute for several minutes. How should he introduce himself? That question was soon settled by the appearance of a big, fair-haired man of about his own age. He had strolled out at the front door, his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, his eyes bent to the ground. He was smoking a well-seasoned briar pipe, and seemed to be worried with some perplexities of thought, for he now and then kicked rather viciously at an unoffending pebble.

Bryan advanced to meet him, and the fair man raised his eyes. They were large, pale blue, and very prominent. Such eyes usually denote both self-conceit and self-indulgence.

"Hello," he said. His voice was big, like himself, and resonant. He glanced at Endicott from head to foot, and changed his tone, albeit his manner was sullen.

"I was in quest of a person named Tyldesley," answered Bryan.

The man knitted his brows.

"You are very vague. If you are selling sewing machines, or rot of that kind, I'd advise you to get out. My name is Tyldesley."

"It does not say much for the rest of the family," thought Bryan. "Well, I'm in for the adventure, so let's get through with it."

"I expected to meet an older man," he said.

"My father? Dead, long since. I am the only male Tyldesley belonging to this branch of the family Now what is it you are after? If it's no affair of mine you can interview my mother or quit the premises. I've got no time to waste."

Bryan felt half inclined to pitch into the fellow. Heavens! If this should be the cousin whom Vivien had married—if, indeed, she had married anyone.

"Try and be civil, Mr. Tyldesley. I am not selling sewing machines, neither am I buying left-off clothing. Perhaps it may convey something to your mind if I say that my name is Endicott—Bryan Endicott."

"I've never heard of such a name," said Mr. Tyldesley; "but it doesn't interest me in the least. Come indoors, will you? We can't talk here."

"Certainly."

Mr. Tyldesley's curiosity was aroused, and he glanced critically at Bryan several times, although the bored expression never left his face.

"Now, sir, take a seat, and fire away. The fact is,

I have an appointment with my neighbour, and haven't a moment to spare."

"Mr. Starkey?" suggested Bryan. "I've just left his place. I heard him remark that he was coming here to-day. It was he who told me that Tyldesley occupied the next house to his."

Mr. Tyldesley jumped up at once, and held out his hand.

"You will pardon my incivility, Mr. Endicott. Any friend of Mr. Starkey is welcome here. Why the deuce didn't you say so before?"

"Don't distress yourself, Mr. Tyldesley. I am no friend of Mr. Starkey, and hope never to speak to the man again. To come to the point, I have been away from England for a number of years, and am looking up old acquaintances. I was inquiring after Mr. Lennox and his daughter this morning, and heard that my old master was dead, and that Miss Vivien was staying with relatives named Tyldesley."

If a bolt had dropped from the blue, Mr. Tyldesley could not have looked more alarmed. His face went as white as paper, and he clutched convulsively at the arms of the chair in which he was seated.

Then he smiled in a sickly sort of fashion, and rising, tottered to a sideboard, and helped himself to a stiff tot of brandy.

"The way I suffer with this infernal ague and malaria, and a few other ills, contracted in India, is terrible," he explained. "I am barely thirty years of age, and yet a confirmed hypochondriac. Nothing appears to relieve me for long." He mopped great beads of perspiration from his brow. "Do you ever suffer in this way?"

"No," was the dry response, and the man felt decidedly uncomfortable under Bryan's steady gaze.

Recovering himself a little, he glared back at his visitor, and said—

"You have been away from England a good many years if you have only just discovered that Mr. Lennox is dead."

"Twelve or thirteen."

"And he has been dead that long," Mr. Tyldesley said, his surly manner returning. "Of course, I can understand your curiosity, but it's a bit out of date. I don't suppose that my cousin Vivien even remembers your name. I never heard her mention it. She was only a baby, so to speak, when her father died,"

"That's so," Bryan agreed, his spirits drooping. "But we were boy and girl chums, and I am naturally interested in the fate of all my old companions. Is your cousin Vivien married?"

"No, but soon will be. Upon my life, sir, I think we had better bring this silly interview to a close. I wonder what my cousin would say to all this?"

He laughed coarsely, and shrugged his big shoulders.

Bryan felt that he was being disillusioned, and there was a regretful little pain at his heart. He rose.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Tyldesley, but there is no harm done. Mr. Lennox was always very kind to me, and as I have returned home a rich man, I am anxious to help my old friends who need it."

"Don't worry yourself about Vivien, sir; she's got plenty, and is going to marry a man with plenty more. If you are anxious to part with your extra wealth," he added, with another coarse laugh, "I'm not above taking a bit. Have a drink, will you?"

"No, thanks, I've only recently lunched with Mr. Starkey."

Tyldesley turned to the brandy decanter again.

"Well, I don't mind telling you that he's Vivien's

future hubby. Pity you're not friends. What's the split over, if I'm not asking a rude question? It isn't his policy to quarrel where there's money."

But Bryan was standing aghast.

"Vivien Lennox marry that old wolf!" he exclaimed. He remembered her as a child again, and shivered.

Tyldesley laughed boisterously.

"You've hit Sharkey off to a T," he said, "but he's awfully sweet on Vivien."

Bryan felt sick at heart.

"I will destroy that hateful letter the moment I can," he thought. "And as to Vivien Lennox, I have no further wish to see any broken idols. She must be utterly worthless to——"

"Better go, hadn't you, Mr. Endicott?" Tyldesley said, uneasily. "Old Starkey is coming along the drive, and I can't afford to have a scene here. I shall be happy to continue your acquaintance, though, if you don't mind, because I've begun to take to you."

Bryan was not at all flattered, and his face expressed it.

"I am afraid that our ways lie far apart, Mr. Tyldesley. Have Mr. Starkey shown into another room, and then, like the Arabs, I will silently steal away."

Mr. Tyldesley jumped at the suggestion, and when he had vanished Bryan took the folded love letter from his pocket-book, intending to toss it into the fire that was burning in the grate.

"There goes one of the sweetest links of the past," he murmured.

But it did not go, for a woman's sweet, yet penetrating notes disturbed his action, and the voice of Tyldesley said—

"Don't go in there, Vivien; Mr. Starkey's in the music-room."

Bryan's heart seemed to stand still. What a voice the gentle Vivien had developed.

"All right," she responded. "I must have a look at my hair, and I've got a new smile in training for my darling old lover."

The door flew open, and the girl with the hair like ripe corn fluttered across the room to a mirror. Bryan saw that she was tall, graceful, and remarkably pretty, and when she turned her astonished eyes upon him, he observed that they were brilliantly blue.

"What a girl you are," grumbled Tyldesley in the doorway. "Mr. Endicott, this is my cousin, Vivien Lennox, whom you knew as a child, twelve years since."

Miss Lennox gave Bryan one quick, comprehensive glance, then advanced towards him with outstretched hands, saying—

"Oh, how delightful to meet you again, Mr. Endicott, and how you have grown."

CHAPTER VI

DISENCHANTMENT

"CAN this be my fairy Vivien?" was Bryan's first thought. "Heaven forbid!"

"Have I changed so very much?" she asked, softly, her woman's swift intuition divining the reason of his visit. "We thought a great deal of each other as children, did we not, Bryan?"

Tyldesley heard this much in amaze, then his face cleared, and he whispered—

"I will tell Mr. Starkey that you will be with him in ten minutes, Vivien. Glad to see that you and my cousin are such old friends, Mr. Endicott."

With this he withdrew, and closed the door after him.

Bryan's steady gaze was fixed upon Miss Lennox's beautiful features, but there was bewilderment in it. She looked much older then he had expected, the dewy violet eyes had changed to a bold and brilliant blue, and the sweet face that he remembered was now a mere study of colour and contour. As for her voice, with its music and gladness, he could hardly believe that it had become so powerful, clear, and metallic.

"Well, Bryan, I have endured the inspection with a pang at my heart, for I can see that you are horribly disappointed. We cannot always wear the angelic innocence of a baby. And I am sure that it would be awfully tiresome if we could."

"I am disappointed, Miss Lennox——"

"Can't you call me Vivien? There is no one to object, if I do not."

"Mr. Starkey may," he answered, grimly.

"So Dick Tyldesley has told you about that." She laughed, as she made a grimace. "I can't think how I have drifted into an engagement with him. I almost believe that he is gifted with some wicked power. Do you know Mr. Starkey?"

"Surely you have not forgotten, Miss Lennox?"

"I have forgotten a great deal, Bryan, in twelve years. And I have wondered so often what had become of you, and if you had quite forgotten me."

Her flashing eyes disconcerted him, and her flippant remarks about the man whom she expected to marry grated harshly on his nerves. And yet this was the cherished sweetheart of his boyhood, whose soft cheeks and lips he had kissed a hundred times.

"I am sorry I have been so neglectful, Vivien," he said, almost tenderly.

He saw the colour leap into her face, and her eyes drooped.

"That sounds ever so much nicer, Bryan. Has fortune been kind to you in all the long years?"

"Yes; I have laboured unceasingly with one object in view. No doubt Mr. Starkey will tell you all about it." He looked away uncomfortably. "I have returned a wealthy man, and an unkind fate makes me your future husband's determined enemy."

"And you are disappointed with everything," she said gently. "I see it in your eyes. I hear it in your voice. As for Mr. Starkey, Bryan, I think that I must have been mad to accede to his wishes." She shivered. "He seems to be terribly fond of me, and he compels me to respond in a hateful way that I cannot understand."

She rose, and laid a trembling white hand on Bryan's arm.

"But it is not too late, if you will help me—if only for the sake of the old days when we were children together. The knowledge that he is your enemy makes me hate him."

"I am so sorry, Vivien," was all that he could say. "But I must go. It is unfair to keep your lover waiting."

"My lover!" she exclaimed, scornfully; then she turned to him with a sigh. "I am selfish; pardon me, Bryan. One little question before you go. Tell me if you have been faithful to our childish vows? Has any other love come between the glamour of the baby days and now?"

"No, Vivien, my life's work has occupied all my thoughts, all my energies."

"Oh, Bryan, what a pitiful creature I must be in your sight!"

A tear glittered on her cheek, and her voice trembled.

"I have your last letter in my pocket now," he said, gently.

There was a short silence, and she covered her eyes with both hands.

"Love me a little for the sake of the old days," Vivien whispered. "You will, won't you, Bryan? It has all come back to me with delightful freshness, and I have been leading such a useless, artificial life. You are going now, Bryan, but you will come again to-morrow. Promise me that you will."

She saw that he hesitated, and continued passionately—

"Don't consider Mr. Starkey for one moment. He has exacted promises from me by virtue of his magnetic will, and my own silly aspirations. He's a

clever man—brilliantly clever—and while I admire his intellect, I despise him personally. Now I am strong enough to withstand him."

"I don't like to hear you talk like that," Bryan answered. "But I will come to-morrow, and we will have a better understanding. For the present, good-bye."

"Good-bye, Bryan. Won't you give me just one little kiss, as you used to do?"

He touched her cheek with his lips, and she suddenly put her arms round his neck. As quickly she released him, and sank into a settee, whispering—

"Don't look at me; I am ashamed of myself. Go, Bryan, go, but come back to me to-morrow."

He heard a sob as he left the room, and the echo of it seemed to be in his ears for hours afterwards. He had seen Vivien, and talked with her, but it was not the Vivien of his dreams.

It is said of woman that she is only a girl grown large, but this one had spoiled in the growing. Her beauty was perfect, but it was too materialistic. Soulless as she evidently was, he yet felt that he would not like to see her the wife of Mr. Starkey. She had probably been misled, over-persuaded, and for the sake of the old days he must stand by her.

While he was striding away to the railway station, and evolving these thoughts through his bewildered mind, Vivien Lennox was talking to her cousin.

"I was never so amazed in my life, Dick, and what a splendid man. He has returned with heaps of money, too—not that that would influence me two straws. I have plenty of my own, and I want social position, such as Mr. Starkey has promised, and such as Bryan Endicott can give. The quiet power in his strong face reveals the fact. As for the milk-and-water rubbish

surrounding us, I despise it. The men are merely walking advertisements for their tailors, and the women animated dolls. No, Dick, I have decided to love Bryan Endicott, and I mean to marry him."

Mr. Tyldesley looked perplexed.

"Then you must handle old Starkey himself. And it's no use beating about the bush, Vivien. You'll have to pay my debts before the devil in him is aroused. I'm worried to death with things."

Vivien regarded him rather scornfully.

"I shan't anticipate my income, even to please you, Dick. Well, now I had better interview my ancient lover."

Without bestowing a further thought upon her cousin, Vivien Lennox rose and went to the music-room, where Mr. Starkey was waiting. He hastened to meet her, his unshapely hands outstretched, his eyes ablaze with passion that all at once was growing so distasteful to her.

"Don't be ridiculous, please, Starkey," she said. Then she burst into a peal of laughter. "You won't be offended, will you?"

"I could not be offended with you, Vivien."

"Don't be too sure. I was just going to say that I never could fall in love with your personal appearance; you are too small, and your bushy eyebrows and whiskers make you so absurdly like a Scotch terrier. I am fascinated merely by your brilliant oratory, by your intellect, your wealth, and your determination to win a title."

"And I worship you, Vivien, absolutely for yourself."

"And my ten thousand a year."

"No, no," he protested, and she believed him.

He wished to embrace her, but she objected.

"I don't want a good thing spoilt," she laughed. "Bryan Endicott has just kissed me."

Mr. Starkey seemed to shrink within himself for a moment, then his eyes flamed like living fire.

"Don't make a fool of yourself," she laughed, mockingly. "We were sweethearts as children, so there was no harm in it. He carries my letters and a locket over his heart. It is the sweet memories of the past that have been his inspiration to deeds of greatness. He's a jolly fine fellow, too."

"I know that he was making a call," said Starkey, feebly. "He asked me about you. I kept quiet in here, as he and I have agreed to differ. And now, Vivien, my beautiful, I think that we can very well dismiss Bryan Endicott and talk about ourselves."

Vivien gently patted his cheek, and the eyes of the infatuated man glittered. He reached for one of her hands.

"Lord Rozenby dines at Coningsby to-morrow," he said. "His lordship's influence is immense."

"I shall be glad to meet him. I dearly love a lord. My aunt is not very well, and, of course, Dick is impossible—so terribly horsey, since he has resolved to win the Derby."

The conversation flagged unaccountably, and Starkey was ill at ease. Vivien played and sang to him, but he did not seem to care for it. He desired to caress her, and she merrily evaded him.

"There's a concert at the Town Hall to-night," he observed at last.

"Thanks, I prefer to stay at home."

Mr. Starkey grinned, and gritted his teeth.

"That Endicott fellow has introduced a note of discord into our harmony, Vivien; you must drop him entirely."

"And if I refuse?"

"There can be no refusal." He shrugged his shoulders. "It is war between us. He wants to buy back the ironworks at his price, and I will only sell at mine. That is perfectly equitable, but Mr. Bryan Endicott says 'no.' He must have the works on his own terms, or he will take them. Then let him take them, if he can. Surely your sense of fair play must tell you that I am in the right. And it is obvious that my wife cannot be upon friendly terms with her husband's enemy."

"But I am not your wife yet," Vivien flashed.

"You will be, my dearest one," he answered, with easy confidence. "Nothing can prevent that. I have loved you, Vivien, from the hour I first beheld you, and I vowed then that you were the one woman for me. I have such absolute confidence in myself that defeat is impossible. I shall marry you; I shall become a Member of Parliament, and ultimately a Cabinet Minister. There are no limitations to my ambitions—there are no honours I cannot attain by the very force of my will. And you shall be the most honoured and envied lady in the land."

"It sounds very nice," reflected Vivien, when he was gone. "But the charm of it has vanished. What annoys me is his confidence of annexing me, and I am really afraid of him at the bottom. How affectionate and silly he is, too, for a man of his years. But I believe, with Dick, that if the varnish is rubbed off a tiger will appear. Oh, bother him! He's no match for Bryan Endicott, and that's the man I'm going to love, honour, and obey—if I do anybody."

CHAPTER VII

"MISS DOLLY"

HAD Bryan consulted his own inclinations and followed them there would have been no dinner for him at Brooklands that evening. The day had been long and arduous, and events had crowded upon each other so fast that his mind was in a state of chaos. As the train carried him slowly in the direction of Dudley, he endeavoured to arrange in some sort of sequence the extraordinary happenings and adventures of the past seven or eight hours.

His meeting with Mr. Heathcote had been purely accidental, but it seemed now to have changed the whole course of his future life. Then had come the discovery of the old love letter, with all the memories which it awoke—the visit to Mr. Starkey—the drive to Stourbridge, and the declaration of war; his call upon Vivien Lennox, and his bitter disillusionment. And all this had come to pass within the space of a few hours.

"I am beginning to be sorry I came home again," he thought, with a sigh. "But now that I am here I will do what I came to do. I have nothing else to live for. As for my dear old love dream, I will put it away from me for ever, and marry this new Vivien Lennox, if only to get the better of that villain Starkey."

Arrived at Dudley, he got into a cab, and told the driver to take him to Mr. Heathcote's place in the Priory Road.

"Half an hour late," he reflected. "Just as well I thought of telegraphing from Stourbridge."

Another fifteen minutes, and Mr. Heathcote was shaking his hand heartily.

"I am abominably dusty and tired," said Bryan, "but you must take me as I am. I give you my word——"

"Bosh! Come upstairs with me, and smarten yourself up a bit. Dolly is on the very tiptoe of expectation."

Bryan groaned inwardly. He felt that he had had enough of women for one day.

"I'm afraid I shall not make a very interesting visitor," he observed, as he followed his host. "I have had an interview with Mr. Starkey."

The last words were pregnant with meaning for Heathcote.

"Oh!" He whistled. "I guessed there was something of the kind in the wind when your telegram came. But don't be afraid of not being interesting, especially to Dolly; she isn't one of the drawing-room young lady sort, my dear boy. She is a thoroughly domesticated little girl, and the right hand of her old father. I have no secrets from her, and if there is a knotty problem to solve, she's got the head to solve it. One word, Bryan—has the die of destiny been cast?"

"It has, and it is war. I made him a fair offer——"

"Dinner's waiting. Hurry up. I am delighted to hear it, my boy."

Bryan hastily washed his face and hands, and brushed his hair, while Mr. Heathcote paced the corridor, and chuckled.

"Quite ready? Come along, and don't be bashful. I don't think I have ever felt so pleased in my life.

I have had to knuckle under to Starkey in a way. He has undersold me, robbed me of my customers, and smiled at me in that wolfish style of his. I hate the sight of his shining white teeth. In the old days your father and I worked amicably together, although we were rivals in business. The trouble is that Starkey is comparatively young, unscrupulous and resourceful, while I shall soon be a back number. But you, my dear boy, you are a tower of strength. And the names of Endicott and Heathcote shall become famous to the uttermost limits of the commercial world."

He slapped Bryan vigorously on the back, and laughed, perhaps a trifle too loudly.

"Still, before deciding, it will be necessary for you to fully grasp my plan of campaign. To make Starkey strike his colours will involve the expenditure of at least a hundred thousand pounds."

Just then he found himself bowing to a regal-looking young lady, whom Mr. Heathcote introduced as—

"My daughter Dolly."

"How do you do, Miss Heathcote?" Bryan said.

They were the first words that rose to his lips, and he was conscious of their stiffness. He was not much of a ladies' man at any time.

"What a great fellow you are, Bryan," she answered, gazing at him serenely. "I should never have known you had we met accidentally. But a dozen years make a great deal of difference in a boy. I was grown up when you went away. But perhaps you have forgotten?"

"I'm afraid I must plead guilty, Miss Heathcote. The time has probably been longer and fuller for me than for you."

She laughed quietly.

"I dare say it has. Father has told me of your

wonderful success, and I only hope it is half as great as he represented. You know his enthusiastic style."

"You are very kind," Bryan answered. "And I hope that you and I will be very good friends, Miss Heathcote."

A faint wave of colour passed over her fair face.

"Why not call me Dolly at once? We are only old friends reunited. I want you to regard me, not as a mere acquaintance, but as an elder sister, because father confides everything to me, and I may be called into your councils."

Bryan smiled with a brightness which pleased her. He was beginning to feel more at his ease, and he felt that after all Miss Heathcote might prove both charming and desirable on better knowledge.

"There will be few councils," he said, smiling again. "My plans are made—and, yes, if you will let me, I will call you Dolly. I don't think there is much chance of our misunderstanding each other."

"I hope not, Bryan, but I see already that you are prepared to resent the idea of a woman's advice."

"I have no use for it," he replied briefly. "I am engaged in a man's work. I shall appreciate your interest and your sympathy——"

"That will do," she smiled, in her pleasant and serene way. "Father thinks that we have had quite time enough in which to renew our acquaintance. Can't you hear him stumping about in the dining-room? Come along, Bryan."

"We haven't done anything special in your honour," Mr. Heathcote remarked to his guest. "This is one of the informal little dinners that I thoroughly enjoy. I am getting too old for much ceremony."

Dorothy Heathcote soon discovered that Endicott could talk eloquently upon many subjects, but when

he touched upon the scheme of his life, a glitter like steel shone in his grey eyes, and his tones were clear, sharp, and incisive. Usually he was very reserved in the presence of women, but he already liked and trusted Miss Heathcote. Her charming candour, her clever tact, and the sweet serenity of her charming face irresistibly appealed to him.

The present and the future were practically settled over the dinner table. The scheme was one of the simplest, and yet one that has appalled the British manufacturer for generations.

The firm of Heathcote was to become Heathcote and Endicott, and Bryan was to have an absolutely free hand. The works were to be gradually demolished, and the antiquated plant discarded as so much old iron. New buildings, new machinery, electricity, and all the appliances of modern science were to be employed.

The reforms were to be drastic and sweeping, but in the end the cost of production would be lessened to such an extent that they would be enabled to compete with the most favoured markets of the world.

"I shall get right down to business to-morrow," said Bryan, with an unconscious Americanism, "and then the battle begins. It means the expenditure of a fortune, Mr. Heathcote. In the eyes of ordinary men I shall appear to be a madman. If you are doubtful of the result——"

"I believe that you want the whole of the prize for yourself," was the half reproachful rejoinder. "No, Bryan, I am not afraid. My only regret is, that I am not a younger man. I am ready with my money, pound for pound against yours. We are making common cause against a vicious and unscrupulous usurper; and at the same time setting an example

which must, in the course of time, arrest the decay of British manufacture. What do you say, Dolly ? "

" Is the opinion of a woman worth anything ? " she asked, mischievously.

Her calm eyes were fixed upon Bryan, and he reddened slightly.

" Yours is, at any rate," he said, gently.

" Then may your success be as I know your energy and ability will be, and in that case all that you hope for will be yours."

She raised her glass of claret to her lips, and looked with smiling eyes at him over the brim.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEW TYPIST

WITHIN a few days an army of workmen was tearing down a portion of Heathcote's Ironworks. Very soon, where had been a hive of industry, was a scene of ruin and desolation. But like magic the hundreds of tons of rubbish disappeared, and in its place a new edifice rose, strong and symmetrical.

As soon as the first of the new buildings was in working order, the remaining portion of the old works vanished, and by the end of the summer a magnificent building, covering several acres, towered above its neighbours. A handsome suite of offices fronted the works, and, as Endicott put it to Miss Heathcote, things very soon began to hum as they had never done before.

Bryan was seated in his private office, tackling a mass of foreign correspondence. Mr. Heathcote had just arrived, beaming with pleasure and full of enthusiasm.

"Orders, more orders, and the cry is: Still they come," he exclaimed, cheerily. "The difficulty is to execute them. The newspapers are full of our originality and enterprise, but foreshadow trouble with the trade unionists on account of labour-saving inventions, that deprive the working man of his bread, as they are pleased to put it."

Bryan looked up frowningly.

"The inventions are my own," he said, "but

Starkey is playing his game with the mob. He calls this an American concern, and speaks of me as Frank Tynan. But that doesn't matter much," he added, his face clearing. " The fight is only in its first stage yet."

There was a knock on the door, and a young clerk announced that a lady wished to see Mr. Endicott. He held a card in his hand, which Bryan took mechanically.

" Miss Edith Bell ? " he read. " I don't know the lady. Tell Mr. Lumsden to attend to her."

" It's the new lady typist, sir," explained the clerk.

" Oh, yes, I think I did ask someone to call. Still, that is in the managing clerk's department."

He dismissed the junior with a wave of the hand, and turned to his letters again.

" I feel completely run down, Heathcote," he observed, yawningly. " I must have a short holiday."

" Of course you must. If you break down the whole structure will topple about our ears like a house of cards. Why not try Deal ? It is wonderfully bracing, and I've got a nice little place there for the season. You know how delighted Dolly will be."

" I think I will."

" Don't think about it. Shall I wire to Dolly ? "

" Just as you like. To-morrow will suit me nicely." He looked at his watch. " I expect visitors shortly—Miss Lennox and Lord Rozenby. I have promised to lunch at Rozenby's place."

Mr. Heathcote's genial face clouded for a moment.

" I have no right to object to your friends, Endicott, but I don't like Lord Rozenby, and I believe that Miss Lennox is to marry our friend Starkey. Do you think it wise to encourage the enemy ? "

" Miss Lennox was once my sweetheart, the first

love of my boyhood," Bryan answered. "And she is not averse from renewing a certain compact which we made in those golden days. After all, sentiment counts for something, even in this iron age."

Mr. Heathcote looked distressed, but he turned his face away while Bryan locked his desk.

"I may not see you again to-day," continued the young man, "so we will consider the Deal matter a fixture."

They left the private office together, and Bryan paced the corridor for a while. Then he turned into Mr. Lumsden's room, and saw that he was still engaged with the new typist. He was reading several difficult passages at more than the average rate of speed, and the machine clicked rapidly under her fast-moving fingers.

"I think that will do," he said, critically examining her work. "That was a severe test. You appear to have done this very well. The great trouble with young ladies is that they rarely know how to spell words of more than two syllables."

Mr. Lumsden bestowed a benignant glance upon the young lady and added—

"You may consider yourself engaged, Miss Bell." He glanced furtively at Endicott, whose back was turned to them. "And you may commence on Monday morning. This will be your desk, and I am sure that you will be very comfortable here, at least, if I can make you so."

The effusive manner of the head clerk did not seem to give much pleasure to Miss Bell, but she murmured her thanks distinctly, though her voice trembled a little.

"I am living at Birmingham," she said, "and will get rooms nearer to my work before Monday."

"Are you alone then?" asked Mr. Lumsden, caressing his meagre whiskers. "If so, I may be able to recommend you to suitable lodgings."

"I know the neighbourhood very well, thank you," was the hasty rejoinder. "I live with an aunt."

Bryan noticed that her voice was exceedingly sweet, and that her head was crowned with a mass of bright brown hair.

"You are perfectly satisfied with the salary we offer," resumed Mr. Lumsden. "One guinea a week?"

"Oh, yes; thank you."

As Bryan glanced at the girl's slender form, even his inexperienced eyes told him that she was cheaply dressed. He hardly approved of the managing clerk's patronizing and familiar manner. He had never cared much for the man, but tolerated him as an old servant of Mr. Heathcote's. Mr. Lumsden, in turn, was not particularly fond of his new master. He had had his own way in the office for years, and did not altogether appreciate the new order of things. He was a man of forty, cunning, mean-souled, and vain. He was still unmarried, and assumed the airs of a boy of twenty-five.

"As the lady is thoroughly efficient," Bryan interposed, "her services will be worth a guinea and a half. Now, Mr. Lumsden, I want your attention for a few minutes."

Miss Bell glanced swiftly at Mr. Endicott, and he caught the glint of the bluest of blue eyes. He opened the door of the office for her, and took off his hat as she passed out, much to Lumsden's disgust.

"Rather a big salary for a typist, sir," he said. "Don't you think it would have been better to raise it by degrees?"

"The matter is settled," rejoined Endicott, shortly.

"Mr. Lumsden, you will find several letters on my desk, with notes of my own annexed. Reply to these fully at once, so that I may approve and sign them when I get back to the office."

So saying, he started for the door, and the clerk scowled after him savagely.

"The firm was nice and comfortable until he came into it," he snarled, under his breath. "Now it's nothing but hurry-scurry. It all looks very nice in the papers, but if I know anything about business, he'll find he's bitten off more than he can chew. Fancy snapping me up before that girl as he did. It makes a man look like a fool."

He stared moodily out of the window, his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets.

"I wonder if it's safe to trust Starkey?" he went on. "I know that his monkey is up, and that he has money to burn. If I could only get something in black and white out of him, I should feel a bit surer."

He gazed along the straight white road beyond which was the town of Dudley. A little to the right the wooded grounds of the castle stretched darkly against the blue sky for many a mile.

All at once a smart motor car came into view, and rolled almost silently up to the gates of the works. Mr. Lumsden heard a woman's laughter, and saw the gleam of yellow hair, under a large picture hat.

"I am sorry that we have kept you waiting, Bryan," he heard her say, laughingly, "but Lord Rozenby is always so sleepy."

Rozenby, who was lying back in a tired and indolent attitude, protested.

"Really, now, I quite forgot the appointment. Very ungallant, don't you know, but life is too short

to worry over small matters. How d'ye do, Endicott, old boy ? "

" Oh, pretty fit, thanks. Good morning, Miss Lennox," said Bryan, as he sprang into the car.

" So ho," muttered Mr. Lumsden. " And aren't they jolly familiar. Now is she playing the game, or is he ? "

He was startled by hearing someone in the room. It was only the junior clerk who was specially retained as his assistant.

" You will please knock before entering my office, Marsh," he said, sharply.

" I always do, sir."

" Don't attempt to argue with me. You did not knock. How am I to settle these estimates if I am to be constantly disturbed ? I will not have any impertinence, so don't smirk behind your hand, or bang the door after you."

But the junior had already retired into the corridor with a big ledger on his shoulder. He looked back, and made a grimace.

" If ever the guv'nor takes it out of him, he takes it out of me. Estimates ! A lot he knows about estimates. Mr. Endicott does 'em all himself. I suppose he was thinking about the new typist. Isn't she just a stunner ! "

He turned into the general office, and explained to another junior that Lumsden was " off his chump."

" What can you expect ? " asked his colleague, with an air of scorn. He was an amateur author. " The man's literature consists solely of a vulgar society paper and ' Stubbs' Gazette ' "

CHAPTER IX

THE REAL VIVIEN

Miss Bell quitted the offices of Heathcote and Endicott, and walked smartly in the direction of the Tipton end of the castle grounds. She was determined to seek suitable apartments without delay, and as a residential place Dudley was far preferable to Tipton. There was a walk of two miles to be considered, but her health was perfect, and the journey was of small importance to her.

She turned to take a look at the imposing new works. There was a wistful light in her violet blue eyes, and a quivering motion on her tender lips. Just then the smooth roll of the machinery and the vibrating throbs of the hammers were music in her ears ; even the smoke stacks blotting out the beauty of the day were glorious to see.

Then a flush sprang into her cheeks. A car had swung up to the gates of the works, and Bryan Endicott was bowing to an overdressed woman, with a head of suspiciously bright hair.

She turned away with a frown, and went on rapidly, never pausing until she was in the restful shade of the castle grounds.

"Dear old trees," she murmured, "and the birds and flowers all just as they were. Well, my old friends, here I am back again once more."

She lingered in the mazy ways until the chiming of a church bell told her that it was three o'clock, and

she remembered that there was a great deal yet to be done. Suitable lodgings were not always to be found when wanted, but on this occasion Miss Bell was fortunate.

She left the castle, and turned her steps towards the lower end of the town, choosing a quiet street of modest houses. Several of these had apartments to let, and the first that the girl inspected were both clean and cheerful.

"There are only two of us," she explained, "my aunt and myself, and our name is Bell."

"Yes, miss," the rather doubtful landlady replied, diffidently. "Is it likely to be a permanency? If so, we can better regulate the terms. You see, my husband is a clerk, and we live in a bigger house than we can really afford, so that we may be among nice people. Before we came here we had a small place, but the neighbours were most unpleasant. I hope that your aunt isn't an invalid, miss?"

"Oh, dear, no!"

"Excuse my asking, but I always like to know what may be expected of me. The last lodger used to lie in bed banging the floor with a chair. He nearly drove me mad. If the references are all right, and my husband is very particular about that, I think that we can make you comfortable. The two bedrooms and sitting-room being all on one floor save a great deal of work."

Miss Bell bit her lip.

"I am afraid that the exchange of references in the ordinary way will take too long," she said. "It is Thursday, and I must be settled by Saturday, as I have to commence business on Monday next. At present we are living in Birmingham."

"Are you engaged in Dudley?"

"No, at Tipton—Heathcote & Endicott's new place."

"Oh, then that'll be all right. My husband is the weighing-machine clerk there." The woman's face beamed. "Our name is Mason."

"Then we may consider it settled, Mrs. Mason?"

"Certainly, if you have told me the truth. I don't mean any offence," she added, hastily, for Miss Bell's eyes had suddenly flashed. "Only the lies that some people do tell."

"I have two of the firm's letters in my pocket," said Miss Bell, coldly. "And I will deposit a sovereign with you."

The landlady's last scruple vanished, and when Miss Bell left she congratulated herself upon a brilliant stroke of business.

"But, my! ain't she pretty," she reflected. "And she's got a haughty sort of temper of her own when she's riled. Still, that's only nature. At Mr. Endicott's new works, is she?"

In the meanwhile, Miss Bell, conscious of having done a good day's work, went to a confectioner's and drank tea and ate cakes with the gusto of a child.

"It is good to be back again," she thought. "I never hoped to see the dear old town again—I never wished to see it, until now. Many of the faces are familiar, and although I never spoke to the people in my life they seem like old friends."

She went to the railway station, and took a ticket to Birmingham. Ordinarily it is a tiresome journey, for there is a change at Dudley Port, and a long wait on a bleak and bare platform. But Miss Bell noticed none of these things; her mind was too full of the future.

Arrived at Birmingham, she threaded her way

through the busy thoroughfares, until she reached a street of small private houses. She entered one of these, and running lightly upstairs, precipitated herself into the sitting-room at the top.

"I've done it, auntie," she announced, breathlessly. "And now it's all over I feel so frightened, and so tired."

Tears were standing on her eyelashes, and she was trembling in every limb.

An elderly lady approached the girl, and caressed her shining hair.

"Oh, you wilful child; I never thought that you would carry it through to the end. There, don't say a word until you are rested. Give me your hat and coat, and I will put them away."

Miss Bell obeyed, laughing rather hysterically the while.

"Yes, I have got the situation, auntie—a guinea and a half a week. Think of that! Good-bye to piano teaching and painting lessons. I don't believe that I have ever earned ten shillings a week, and now I am going to have thirty-one shillings and sixpence. Don't forget the odd sixpence. Oh, what an expense and a drain I have been to you."

"Hush, my darling!"

"No, auntie, I won't hush. I must tell you everything. I answered Heathcote & Endicott's advertisement for a typist because I felt that I must see him again. We have read so much about him in the papers, and somehow I felt that he partly belonged to me, but that is awfully silly, isn't it? As you know, I never expected that any notice would be taken of my application. I was only one among many others, but my luck, good or evil, has stood by me, and I am engaged."

Miss Bell put her arms around the elder woman's neck, and kissed her wildly.

"And you really saw Mr. Endicott?" her aunt asked, gently.

"Yes, it seemed so strange. I nearly dropped to the floor when one of the clerks went to announce me, and I was so relieved when the chief clerk told me that the matter was left in his hands. Not that I was afraid that Mr. Endicott would remember me, or any such trivial incident in his wonderful life. He came into the office during the interview, a great, big fellow, and I almost called him Bryan. Then I kept my face turned away from him all the time, but he took very little notice of me."

"My darling, I am afraid that you have acted unwisely," her aunt said, doubtfully, "but you are so terribly wilful. It is not yet too late to draw back, and you can write that you have reconsidered the matter——"

"Oh, no, I can not—I will not. I have not only accepted, but I have taken some very nice apartments, and paid a sovereign on account of the rent. I feel that I must get back near to the old home; something impels me that I cannot understand."

"But if Mr. Endicott recognizes you?"

"That is quite impossible now, auntie. He looked at me as men look at absolute strangers, and seemed bored that he should have to look at me at all; so I know that I am safe. I shall go to the office on Monday morning, and I shall do as I am told, and earn thirty-one shillings and sixpence next week. The money will be very useful, auntie. I haven't a decent pair of gloves to wear, and there are holes in my boots. The chief clerk, who is nominally my taskmaster, treated me very nicely, and purred about like a sandy

cat—at least, that is what he reminded me of. I can't say that I like him, though," she added reflectively.

"Now run away, and change your dress, my dear," her aunt advised, "while I get the tea."

"One word more," said the girl. "We must arrange to leave here on Saturday morning. Don't you worry, auntie; I will bear all the responsibility."

She left the room with a song upon her lips—

What is the meaning of the song
That rings so clear and loud,
Oh, nightingale, amid the copse—
Oh, lark, above the cloud?
What says thy song, oh joyous thrus ,
Up in the walnut tree?
"I love my love, because I know
My love loves me."

"But my love does not love me now," she laughed. "He does not even remember my existence. I am a foolish dreamer, and I wish that I could forget that I am Vivien Lennox, even as he has forgotten."

CHAPTER X

THE DISMISSAL OF STARKEY

BRYAN ENDICOTT half regretted that he had accepted Lord Rozenby's invitation before the car had carried him half way to the house. He was not in the least interested in Miss Lennox's empty chatter; indeed, her artificiality impressed him very unfavourably this morning. Lord Rozenby rarely spoke, and seemed to be the perfect embodiment of utter indolence.

"I don't think that you have ever been to Greystoke before, Endicott?" he remarked, with a yawn.

"No," was the short rejoinder. He considered it a needless question, as he had not met Lord Rozenby half a dozen times.

"Greystoke is a home to be proud of," Miss Lennox said. "But domestic comforts have no attraction for Mr. Endicott. When he isn't at work he feeds at a second-rate hotel. How long is this sort of thing going to last?"

She tapped his shoulder playfully with her sunshade.

"Oh, I can't tell," Bryan answered, feeling rather bored. "I am not myself exactly; I think I must have a holiday—a change of thought—a change of scene."

"I will believe it when I see it."

"Then your belief will be soon, for I'm off to Deal to-morrow."

"Good gracious!" Miss Lennox was dismayed.

"You are going to Mr. Heathcote's summer place, and have not even mentioned your plans to me."

Bryan was about to reply indifferently, when the loud tooting of a horn caused the party to look sharply round.

"Starkey and his beastly car!" exclaimed Lord Rozenby. "By the way, that reminds me that he has an open invitation to my place, and he has turned up at an inopportune moment. Tyldesley is with him, too. Hope you don't mind, Endicott? If you do, I'll tell him that this is a private party."

"Oh, no; Mr. Starkey and I understand one another perfectly," Bryan answered, coldly.

"Don't imagine that I was aware of this," Vivien whispered, a steely glitter in her blue eyes. "If my cousin Dick has turned traitor, I shall quit his mother's house at once."

The motor car had drawn alongside, and Starkey was speaking.

"This is an unlooked-for pleasure and surprise." He raised his hat and bowed. "I telegraphed to Greystoke a couple of hours since—a business matter purely? I trust I don't intrude."

"No," drawled Rozenby. "But if you have business with me, I must decline to be bothered. Life is too short for worry. Get ahead, my dear Starkey, the nose of your infernal old machine gets on my nerves."

Again Starkey raised his hat, grinned wolfishly, and the car sped away, Rozenby's man slackening speed to allow it to get ahead of them.

As it passed Vivien Lennox bestowed a scornful glance upon Dick Tyldesley, but he gazed sheepishly in another direction.

"I can't say that I am in love with Mr. Starkey,"

said Rozenby, frowning. "I'm sure that if it weren't for you, Miss Lennox, I should drop him."

"Pray don't consider me in the matter."

Rozenby raised his eyebrows.

"He is making a tool of me for election purposes. I am billed to be chairman at some meeting, and, by Jove, I don't remember giving my permission. The exertion would be too much for me. If it will not annoy you, Miss Lennox, I shall explain to Starkey."

"Explain by all means."

"Then there is your cousin?"

"He counts for nothing," said Vivien, with a flash of her eyes. "He is an unscrupulous loafer. I have washed my hands of him."

Lord Rozenby smiled.

"There is one out of the field, at all events," he thought, his face lighting up. But it was only for the fraction of a moment.

"You surprise me, really you do. I thought that he was merely under the thumb of Starkey. I have felt the man's power myself. It is very likely that I did promise to chairman his confounded meeting. He is so persuasive, you know, and magnetizes one's will in some way."

"Do you believe in that nonsense?" asked Vivien Lennox, contemptuously.

"You have confessed to it yourself."

"Never," she retorted. Then she hesitated. "If he has appeared to influence me, I have led him up to it. I know that he is fond of me in his way," she shivered, "but I am sure that I hate him now."

"You are afraid of Mr. Starkey—a little?" Lord Rozenby hazarded.

"A little," she repeated, shrugging her shoulders.

"But I am well protected," she added, glancing at Bryan.

"Yes," assented Lord Rozenby with a sigh.

The car turned into an avenue of magnificent trees, and the old mansion of Greystoke stood revealed. It was a grim, irregular building, pierced with countless windows that gleamed in the autumn sunshine. The grey walls were covered with creepers that seemed splashed with crimson, and the towers and turrets were sharply outlined against the sky.

"What do you think of Greystoke, Endicott?" asked Rozenby, lazily, though there was a glow of pride in his eyes.

"A splendid old house! A picturesque fortress," was the reply. "I shall buy a similar place myself when I settle down."

"Why not buy Greystoke? It is far too big for my simple needs."

"But you will marry?"

"I don't think so." He was gazing at Vivien Lennox. "And the responsibility is wearying. But we will talk it over at some future time, Endicott. You see there is no sentiment about me. I never saw Greystoke until I came into it unexpectedly a couple of years since. The old lawn and the timber are beautiful, and the only blot at present is that confounded car of Starkey's at the door."

He leaned towards Vivien Lennox as the car was pulled up.

"I shall get rid of Mr. Starkey. I have your permission?"

"Yes."

The girl's face paled, and her lips tightened. Mr. Starkey was giving some instructions to his chauffeur, but hurried to assist Miss Lennox to alight. She,

however, disdained his proffered hand, and sprang lightly to the ground.

"You are looking more charming than ever this morning, Vivien," he whispered.

"Am I indeed?" She spoke coldly, and avoided his gaze. She dreaded the power which she had so recently been ridiculing.

"I think that we are not within earshot of the servants, Mr. Starkey," Lord Rozenby said, walking up to them. "Fact is, old boy, I hate to be inhospitable, but you have upset a private little party."

Mr. Starkey bared his gleaming teeth, and laughed.

"Sorry, Rozenby—devilish sorry. Neither you nor Endicot can have anything particularly private with my future wife, so we can take ourselves off, if it comes to that. Vivien," he added, "we will go home."

"Nothing of the kind," interposed Rozenby, coolly. "Miss Lennox prefers to remain here—in fact, she has requested me to give you and her cousin the straight tip, don't you know. No heroics, old chap, if you please, because I hate a scene. My nerves won't stand it, really."

Mr. Starkey's face was livid, and his bushy whiskers seemed to stand on end.

"What nonsense is this?" he burst out.

"It isn't nonsense at all," Vivien answered, bravely. "I dislike you, Mr. Starkey, that is all, and I am determined to have nothing more to do with you. And as for you," she added, flashing a glance at Dick Tyldesley, "I despise a toady and a traitor."

She turned to Bryan, who was standing apart.

"Take me indoors, Bryan, or I shall faint; I feel ever so silly."

"It's no use fuming and threatening, Starkey,"

continued Lord Rozenby ; " she is a woman of spirit, and has awakened to the fact that she cares for somebody else in reality. Endicott is beating you at every point, and you had better retire gracefully from the field. Shall I send a servant to bring your car back ? No. Well, good-bye—I must go and look after my guests. By the way, I shall not chairman any more of your public meetings, so please do not use my name again. Ta-ta."

He swung round, and strolled towards the house, stroking his moustache, and murmuring—

" Yes, there is one out of the way undoubtedly, but that was a foregone conclusion. She is in love with Endicott, but he—bah ! It is not in him to care for a woman any more than he would for a horse—a dog—a picture."

A few minutes later Mr. Starkey and Dick Tyldesley were whirling along the avenue and the face of Starkey was the face of a human fiend.

CHAPTER XI

IF HE SHOULD MEET HER

"I'm so glad that it is all over," Miss Lennox said, when they were at lunch, "and you can't think how much I admire you, Lord Rozenby."

Rozenby smiled.

"It was a pleasure, I assure you. I have wanted to quarrel with Starkey for a long time, you know."

"But I had an idea that you were so awfully indolent and inoffensive."

"And so I am. The life I live is sadly enervating." He glanced at Endicott with a smile. "Now I can imagine you pitching Starkey neck and crop back into his car."

"I'm not blessed with your coolness, Rozenby," Bryan laughed. "I never saw anything better done in my life; no fuss, no noise, only simple annihilation."

"I cultivated that sort of thing when I was in the diplomatic service. I have fought a duel or two, and killed my tiger." He yawned. "But that was years ago, in India. Now, Miss Lennox, I suppose that I can leave your future movements to be discussed with Endicott. Starkey will have to be watched, and I should imagine that your home with the Tyldesleys will now be impossible."

"I have other friends," Vivien answered, flushing.

Rozenby checked the words that rose to his lips.

"I shall send word to my maid to pack up everything belonging to me, and leave at once," the girl

continued. "I can find a warm welcome almost anywhere, because I am rich."

Rozenby yawned again.

"I'm sure that you will excuse me," he said, rising. "I must have a cigar, and forty winks while you two arrange the immediate future."

He quitted the room, and Endicott looked at Vivien Lennox in silence for a full minute.

"Shall we have a stroll in the grounds?" he asked, presently.

"Yes," she assented.

He led the way through a French window that opened into a veranda festooned with sweet-smelling creepers and flowers.

"It is delightful here," Vivien said. "What a glorious view. It is an ideal spot, and yet Lord Rozenby is not satisfied—is not happy. If he is determined to sell, Bryan, you must not let the chance be lost. To possess a home like this would be the crown of my ambition."

Her eyes were shining, and her heart throbbed tumultuously.

"I have no objection," he said, quietly, "and you will need someone to protect you from the persecutions of Starkey. He believes himself to be an injured man. You are quite sure that you are making no mistake, Vivien," he added, gently.

"How can I possibly make a mistake, Bryan?"

They left the veranda, and were crossing the lawn in the direction of a secluded walk in a well-wooded part of the grounds. The girl was looking up at him with shining eyes.

"If I have any regrets at all, they are caused by your coldness."

"Yes, I'm afraid that there's little of the gushing

lover about me. I hardly understand myself at times. And yet the fragrance of the past is very sweet. The world has given me so many hard knocks, Vivien."

"But, Bryan, you have returned them with interest."

"Yes," he answered, grimly.

There was a brief silence, and she nestled closer to him.

"Why will you make me say everything?" she asked, reproachfully. "I'm sure that your mind is away in those old works again, or perhaps you are thinking of Deal, and Miss Dorothy Heathcote. Do you know, Bryan, that I am awfully jealous of Miss Heathcote?"

He frowned a little.

"She is a good and beautiful woman. You must not be jealous of her." Then he said, banteringly, "There is only one being of whom you need to be jealous, Vivien, and that is yourself."

"Myself!"

She affected amazement.

"The little Vivien of my boyhood."

"I understand. You are disappointed in the Vivien of to-day. But, Bryan, my dear one, I could not always remain little and good. You looked at me then with different eyes. You were an enthusiastic, sentimental boy—probably steeped in Tennyson—as I was. The stolen interviews—the stolen kisses——"

"There were no kisses, Vivien."

"Then there should be now."

He pressed his lips to her cheek, and she sighed.

"One would think that you were my parent, or elderly guardian," she laughed shortly. "Oh, I know that the disillusionment must have been shocking

when you came home to find me engaged to be married to an old wolf like Starkey."

"It was," admitted Bryan, "and I had that very day discovered your last letter written in the long ago, still lying in the hollow of our trysting tree. It was all stained, but perfectly legible."

"And you have it now, Bryan?"

"It is next to my heart."

"I should like to see it."

"You shall some day, as soon as I can associate you with my boyish love dream. I will not deceive you, Vivien. I believe that you care for me, but I do not love you in the way that a man ought to love the woman he is to marry. I don't think that I should have looked upon you a second time if it had not been for our little romance in the past. I have felt it a duty, too, to take you from Starkey."

"You are brutally blunt," she said, rather bitterly. "But I will make you care for me yet, Bryan."

Silence fell between them for a while. At length Bryan spoke again—

"I have defeated Starkey at every point, and I am satisfied. Indeed, if he were not such an out-and-out rogue, I could find it in my heart to pity him. But let us dismiss the man from our minds, once and for all." He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "The home of the Tyldesleys is impossible for you now, I understand."

"I'm afraid so. I hate being so near to Mr. Starkey. It would not matter if I could trust my cousin." She clasped her hands tightly, and a frightened look crept into her eyes. "I will not act hastily. My aunt is a good soul, and I will speak to Dick. He may have meant no harm in bringing Mr. Starkey here."

"And in the meantime, Vivien, you can hurry the wedding arrangements. It makes no difference to me how soon,. I must go to America next month, and perhaps I can take my wife with me."

"Oh, Bryan."

Genuine tears sprang into her eyes.

"You have made me so happy, and I'm not the sort of girl that cries very often. I know that I am not half good enough for you, but I will love you as no other woman can."

"If I have made you happy, I am satisfied," he answered, quietly. "You can be ready in a month?"

"Oh, yes." She spoke eagerly, flushing warmly the while.

"Then we will consider it settled."

They walked back to the house slowly, and a great triumph shone in Vivien Lennox's eyes. Bryan's manner was almost indifferent. He had saved his sweetheart of the long ago from a man whom he loathed. He had regarded it as a duty, and he had done it.

Lord Rozenby met them on the veranda. He gave a keen glance from one to the other, then looked quickly away.

"I'm afraid that I make a very poor host," he apologized, "but two are company—you know the rest," he smiled, rather drearily. "I hope that Miss Lennox has decided upon a haven of refuge."

"We have decided to get married," Endicott answered bluntly.

"Then I may be able to get rid of Greystoke," Rozenby said. "Allow me to congratulate you."

"There will be a wedding within a month, then we shall go to America, where I have rather pressing business. In the meanwhile Miss Lennox will stay

at the Tyldesleys'. Perhaps you will undertake the duties of best man, Rozenby ? "

" Sorry, old boy, but I'm going abroad myself almost immediately. Three o'clock ? So it is, by Jove ! And you must leave in half an hour."

" Yes, I must see Miss Lennox safely home, before I return to the works, as I shall be away for a day or two."

" Good ! I will order the car, and some black coffee and cigarettes at the same time." Then he whispered in Endicott's ear, " I could not endure being at the wedding, for I am half in love with Vivien Lennox myself."

He turned abruptly and quitted the room.

Ten minutes later the coffee was served, and Rozenby was chatting gaily with Miss Lennox.

" You love Greystoke," he was saying, " and you shall have it. If I were a very wealthy man, it should be my wedding present to the most beautiful of women. I have wondered if I could afford it several times of late."

" Don't be ridiculous," laughed Vivien. There was a mixture of incredulity and amazement on her face. " It is selfish of me even to wish you to sell Greystoke. You will want to settle down some day."

" Never," he answered shortly.

" What a delightfully singular man you are," was her careless rejoinder.

" I am sorry to have to hurry you," Bryan said, entering the room by way of the French window. " The car is waiting. Good-bye, Rozenby, for a day or two."

" I rather like that fellow upon a closer acquaintance," he told Vivien, as they whirled in the direction of Stourbridge. " At first I regarded him as an

empty-headed noodle, but he has been so used to playing parts in his diplomatic career that the habit has become second nature."

Arrived at Mrs. Tyldesley's house, Bryan assisted Vivien to alight. Dick Tyldesley came to the door, his hands pushed deep into his pockets, a surly look on his heavy face.

"One minute," Bryan said, to the chauffeur. "I want you to take me to Stourbridge station."

The man touched his hat, and Bryan motioned Dick Tyldesley aside.

" Miss Lennox and I have arranged to be married soon," he said, in a businesslike, matter-of-fact tone. " You can tell Mr. Starkey, and I think I can trust you to protect your cousin. She was annoyed with you this morning, but it was a passing storm."

" I'm used to her passing storms," he growled, " but I don't like being called a traitor, and all that sort of stuff."

" Well, just as you please. I merely wish to know whether you are an open friend, or an open foe ? "

" I owe Starkey about a thousand," was the gloomy rejoinder.

" You have no cause to worry about that."

" Then I will work for you, Mr. Endicott, and work faithfully. Don't shake me by the hand, it isn't clean."

He glanced sheepishly at Vivien, who was standing near, a flush of happiness on her face.

" Well, I must go. I will write to you from Deal, Vivien."

He kissed her cheek lightly, and the next minute was being driven away.

" He is not particularly loverlike," remarked Dick, " and I hope that you did not quite mean what you

said to me this morning. By George, you have taken the bull by the horns ! "

" I love him," Vivien answered, simply, " and delays are dangerous."

" You are perfectly right there. I did not mention to Starkey that you were going to Greystoke, and I wanted to see you myself, too."

She looked at him inquiringly.

" The other Vivien Lennox has turned up again—I saw her this morning at Dudley station. You know what a memory I have for faces. She is remarkably pretty, and remarkably poor, also, to judge from her outward appearance. She is your first cousin, and mine, too, for that matter, and there is a certain likeness between you. The money that you are sporting about with is hers by right."

" Hush, Dick ! This is terrible news. I thought that she had gone to relatives in Australia."

Her voice shook—her limbs trembled.

" I don't care for the money now—the man I love is all the world to me. If—if—he should meet her ? "

" There is not much chance of that," he said, lightly. " And she doesn't look like the girl to run after any man." An evil light shone in his eyes. " Do you know, Vivien, that I had decided to give the whole thing away after you had turned upon me this morning. It's no joke to be called a traitor, and a viper, and a toad, before a lot of people. You did not dream that you were standing on the edge of a volcano like that, did you ? "

CHAPTER XII

MR. LUMSDEN ADMIRES

THE new typist arrived at the offices of Endicott and Heathcote at nine o'clock on the following Monday morning. Mr. Lumsden, the managing clerk, was already at his post. He greeted her with singular cordiality.

"Half-past nine will be quite early enough for you, Miss Bell, if you care to take advantage of the half hour. You see, I have to examine the letters before I can have your work ready, and it's pleasanter outside than in these stuffy rooms."

"I should prefer to keep to the terms of my agreement," she answered, rather stiffly.

The expression in his pale eyes was disconcerting. She was looking very lovely this morning, and Lumsden was fully aware of it. The long walk in the crisp autumn air had brought a beautiful flush into her cheeks, and a sparkle into her pansy-blue eyes.

"Just as you please, Miss Bell. I am not quite ready for you yet, so you had better make the acquaintance of the young lady clerk in the general office, and she will show you where to put your hat and things."

He touched a bell, in response to which Marsh, the junior clerk, appeared.

"Has Miss Cornforth arrived?"

"Yes, sir," he replied.

"Introduce Miss Bell to her."

He waved his right hand in dismissal, and Miss Bell followed the junior clerk as he went out.

When they were in the corridor, however, Marsh looked at the young lady, and said, with a pleasant smile—

"Miss Cornforth's a bit late this morning, but I wasn't going to let him know it. Come into the office, and wait, please."

Miss Bell had not long to wait, and she discovered that Miss Cornforth was a very jolly sort of girl, but just a little boisterous, and a trifle vulgar.

"I don't envy you your job in Lummy's office," she said, confidentially, as they shook hands.

"Miss Bell's all right at present," Marsh said, with a low chuckle.

Miss Cornforth laughed, and tossed her head.

"Well, I suppose he's a good catch for any girl who don't care for looks. I prefer a man to a monkey."

Miss Bell flushed painfully. She had already noticed Mr. Lumsden's glances of undisguised admiration.

"Well, it isn't for me to advise you," continued the lady clerk. "You know your own business best, but don't give me away. My father's only a baker with a big family, and I don't want to lose my place here."

"I quite understand you," Miss Bell answered. "And I think that I dislike Mr. Lumsden as much as you do."

"Hear! hear!" said Marsh.

As the girls walked away together, Miss Cornforth whispered—

"You can trust that boy to any extent. He's a bit precocious, but sound enough. Don't have any of his offerings of flowers, and that sort of thing,

because I'm sure he must sneak the postage stamps, or he couldn't pay for them."

"Surely that is very wrong?"

"Boys don't think so," Miss Cornforth answered. "They will rob anybody to buy sweets and flowers for girls. Have you arranged about your dinners? My father keeps a dining-room in the town, and you might go home with me. I'd see that you were well served."

"It's very kind of you," Miss Bell said, "and I'm very much obliged."

"You seem awfully nice, and I believe that you are a real lady."

Miss Bell was getting embarrassed.

"What time does Mr. Endicott come to the works?" she asked.

"One never knows. He seems to live here for weeks together, and then vanishes. He hasn't been for a few days, and his letters have been sent on to Mr. Heathcote's place at Deal. Everybody thought that he was going to marry Miss Heathcote, but it comes out now that he's engaged to a Miss Vivien Lennox."

"Oh!" Miss Bell turned her head very quickly.

"I hear that they are going to be married almost at once, and are going to America It's all very sudden and nobody can quite understand it yet. You'll have a nice time with old Lummy, while the governor's away. He'll ride the high horse, because Mr. Heathcote don't count much"

Miss Bell went to her work feeling sick and faint. Of course Bryan Endicott could marry whom he liked, but "Miss Vivien Lennox"!

She went through her duties in a perfunctory manner, and several letters contained glaring mistakes.

Mr. Lumsden was very patient with her, and expressed the opinion that he dictated too quickly.

"You haven't quite settled down to it yet," he said. "It's quite excusable."

She made no reply. The clicking of the machine throbbed in her brain.

"Dear, dear! This won't do," he said, at last. "These estimates are most important. A single flaw might lose the firm thousands of pounds. It's lucky for you, Miss Bell, that Mr. Endicott isn't here, or he would request you to resign. Fortunately he will soon leave for a couple of months on his honeymoon, and in the meantime I'll coach you thoroughly."

"I think that I must resign in any case," Miss Bell answered faintly.

Mr. Lumsden looked alarmed.

"Nonsense, my dear girl. Leave yourself in my hands. I will always be your friend."

He favoured her with a leering glance, and caressed his sandy whiskers.

"I will not enter the office again after to-day," the girl thought. "I could not endure it now. I will write to the firm this morning, and surely they will take my excuse. Thus ends my foolish dream, and Bryan will marry the cousin who has already wronged me beyond forgiveness.

"A quarter to one," announced Mr. Lumsden. "I always go to dinner a few minutes ahead of the work-people. May I escort you, Miss Bell?"

"No, thank you. I am going with Miss Cornforth."

"I am sorry to hear that. Her people are not at all a good class, but I ought to have warned you. Another time, perhaps?"

Miss Bell did not reply, and he continued—

"I run my own show, you know." His narrow

chest expanded half an inch. "I have a house of my own, nicely furnished, and at present my sister rules the roost."

He smiled and hummed a tune, then breaking into the words "'When we are married!'"

He quitted the office still singing, and Miss Bell muttered "Odious wretch!"

At one o'clock Miss Cornforth came to the door, and the two girls went out into the clear sunshine together.

"I hope you are getting on all right," Miss Cornforth remarked, doubtfully.

"No, I am not."

"That insufferable ass, Lummy?"

"Yes," the other girl answered, glad of an excuse.

"Then I should complain to Mr. Endicott. The man's conduct is disgusting. He has been engaged to at least a dozen girls to my knowledge."

"I don't think you will see me here again after to-day."

"Oh, you silly! Just my luck when I like anybody. Why don't you tell Lummy that you've got a young man? That would scare him off. I only hope that Mr. Endicott turns up at the office before he goes abroad. I'll drop him a hint."

"Not for worlds," protested Miss Bell. "I don't wish to stay here. I am not up to the work. The confinement makes my head ache. I have never had a situation like this before."

Miss Cornforth was silent for a while, then she burst out—

"It's just like the stories one reads in books. I mean Mr. Endicott's love affair. It's all got into the paper somehow, and whether it's true or not, it's awfully pretty. It seems he and she were sweethearts

long ago. Then they went abroad, and they thought they had forgotten all about each other, until they met again after so many years. She was going to marry Mr. Starkey, who owns the next works to ours, and he was likely to marry Miss Heathcote, so as to keep all the money in the family. But Miss Lennox came along, and there you are ! Lovely, isn't it ?"

But Miss Bell did not reply, and her companion exclaimed—

"I am sure that you are ill. You have turned as white as a corpse."

CHAPTER XIII

"HE BELIEVES IT IS ME!"

"I AM not well to-day," Miss Bell murmured, leaning heavily on her companion's arm.

"Thank goodness we are close home. Here we are, dear."

Miss Cornforth conducted her friend through the shop to a small sitting-room at the back.

"Now you rest here for a bit while I explain to mother. What can I get you?"

"Just a cup of tea—nothing more. I shall be all right in a few minutes. It's very silly of me, isn't it?"

The colour was already returning to her cheeks, and Miss Cornforth gave a sigh of relief.

"I shouldn't go back to the office if I were you," she said. "I'll tell Mr. Lumsden that you were taken queer, and mother will bear out what I say if he gets nasty."

Miss Bell drank the tea she brought, and considered for a moment.

"I will take your advice. I want to think—to think. No, I cannot eat anything. I feel that the smallest morsel of food would choke me. I will go home. I am much better, and the fresh air will do me good."

"I hope that you will change your mind about leaving, Miss Bell. In any case, you will write to me, won't you?"

"Yes, I will write to you, and I will see you. You have been exceedingly kind to me."

Miss Cornforth insisted upon walking a little way with her.

"You are going through the castle grounds? Then I will see you as far as the gates. I simply will not take no for an answer."

When they parted Miss Bell had quite recovered. Indeed, there was a new determination in the poise of her head, and in the elasticity of her quick, decided step.

It was barely three o'clock when she reached home, and her aunt expressed surprise.

"I was bothered with a headache, and there was nothing important to do at the office," she said, evasively. "The head clerk is very obliging." Her lip curled a little disdainfully. "Can we have an early tea, auntie, and a long talk? I looked over some of my father's papers yesterday, and I want you to tell me about him, and the mother I never knew."

"If it will serve any good purpose, Vivien," Mrs. Bell answered, wistfully.

A knock on the door interrupted them, and Mrs. Mason, the landlady, appeared.

"I thought I heard you come in, miss, but I wasn't sure," she said, apologetically. "You have made a short day. Mr. Mason never gets home till about seven o'clock, but you see he's both machine-clerk and timekeeper, and the hours are very long."

As no explanation was forthcoming, she inquired—

"Is there anything you want?"

"We should like an early tea, Mrs. Mason, if it wouldn't inconvenience you," Vivien said.

"Oh, dear, no. The kettle is on the boil now. Are you going out?"

"Auntie and I think of going for a walk in the castle grounds."

"How nice! I wish I could get out. What with the children and one thing and another, I never seem to have a minute to myself."

She hurried away for the tea, and when she returned, talked with unusual animation, while arranging the table.

"Tom—I mean Mr. Mason—tells me that there'll soon be a fine to-do, what with the marriage of the young master, and the opposition of Mr. Starkey. Of course, being strangers here, you haven't heard the story, and I shouldn't mention if it you weren't in the firm, Miss Bell. Not that it isn't public property enough, for everybody's talking about it. Perhaps you know that Starkey's ironworks were in Endicott's family for a hundred years, and that Mr. Starkey got them by unfair means, so it is said. Oh, he's a wicked-looking little demon! Have you ever seen him, miss?"

"Not to my knowledge," Vivien answered, indifferently.

"When once you do see him then you'll know it. He's a squat sort of man, but very strong looking. His face is enormous for a man of his size, and his eyes flame like live coals under his beetle brows. People say that he is very clever, and quite unscrupulous. Anyway, when the young master came home he wanted to buy back the old works at a fair price, and Starkey wanted three times more than they were worth. Then Mr. Endicott quietly told him that he would have them for nothing at all in the end."

"Yes," exclaimed Vivien, her eyes aglow.

"So he built the grand works and filled them with his inventions, and took nearly all Starkey's trade. I call that revenge enough, don't you?"

"It's not revenge, but common justice. I don't think that Mr. Endicott would stoop to the meanness of petty revenge."

"I don't know," Mrs. Mason said, shaking her head. "He's getting in front of Starkey all ways, and Tom thinks that he'll go too far."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Tom is afraid that Starkey will work him some mischief. You see, the young lady Mr. Endicott is going to marry was engaged to Mr. Starkey. It seems that he's taking everything from him, even his wife. But Mr. Endicott knew her when she was a child, and they were sweethearts then."

Mrs. Bell's eyes rested on the white face of her niece.

"And how can Mr. Endicott be injured?" Vivien asked.

"Oh, in many ways. Tom says Mr. Starkey is a great speaker, and he'll influence the minds of the working .men. Mr. Endicott's inventions are not popular among the most ignorant of them, and Starkey is giving out that they are Yankee inventions that throw men out of employment."

She fairly talked herself out of the room, and Vivien turned to her aunt.

"It's all true, auntie," she said, rather mournfully, "and the woman whom Bryan is going to marry is my cousin, Vivien Lennox. I have been thinking," her fair face flamed, "and the thought will keep returning to me with a strange insistence—you won't think I'm foolish, will you?"

"Go on, darling."

"I feel convinced," Vivien said, boldly, "that Bryan is marrying my cousin because he believes that she is—me!"

"Impossible! She is florid, vulgar, and years older than you. But she may have improved. Good gracious, child, I wonder if it can be so?"

"I am sure of it, auntie," Vivien said, resolutely, as she poured out the tea. "And unless Bryan really loves her I think that he ought to be undeceived. One can't think much of a girl who would engage herself to a horror like Mr. Starkey, and then disengage herself almost without notice when a better man was willing to be the victim. I had resolved never to go back to the office, and told the managing clerk so, but now I am determined to stick to my post, particularly if Bryan is threatened, or his interests are in danger."

"Yes," her aunt assented, doubtfully, for she was a timid woman. "I am sorry that I can't advise you." She wiped a tear from her eyes. "Bryan Endicott may be under a misapprehension, but you must not forget that your cousin is a wealthy woman, while you are poor. Even heroes are selfish. Your cousin is enjoying the money that your grandfather intended you to have, but there was some flaw in the will, and when he made it he did not know that he had another grandchild living. It's all very painful, darling, but I will tell you the little you don't know in a few words.

"Your mother and I were the children of an actor, and for marrying so far beneath him, your father was cut by his family. His elder brother had already contracted a *mésalliance* with the daughter of an innkeeper in an Australian mining camp, and your grandfather was almost wild with grief and disappointment. When your poor mother died soon after your birth I hoped that the estrangement would end, but instead it only seemed to embitter the feeling between father and son

"So matters went on for years, and your father earned a living by teaching. Those days are still fresh in your memory, Vivien. Then your grandfather relented. He was taken ill, and knew that there was no chance of recovery. I believe that he was thrown from his horse, and injured internally. At any rate, he made a will in his usually hasty fashion, leaving the whole of his earthly possessions to his grandchild, Vivien Lennox. Your father was with him at the last, but he had not been buried many weeks when the elder son turned up with a daughter, also named Vivien."

"And the shock killed my father," the girl said. "I believe that he gave up everything without a struggle?"

"He was stricken with paralysis, darling. Ah, it was an awful time. The elder brother and his daughter were received with open arms by certain relatives—the Tyldesleys—who swore that the will related to the other Vivien Lennox. So everything passed away from you, and I'm afraid that the law, even had we been strong enough to fight, would not have helped us."

There was a short silence.

"I believe that my uncle is dead," Vivien said, at last.

"Yes, he enjoyed the money riotously for a little while."

"And Miss Lennox has lived with the Tyldesleys all this time?"

"She has."

"Auntie, I'm sure that Bryan believes that she is me."

"Then what will you do?"

"What can I do? I must watch and wait. It

may be possible that sentiment has been completely driven out of his life by the ambition which has dominated his mind for so long. After all, we were but silly children, and he may only laugh now at our boy-and-girl lovemaking. I cannot say. I only know that I have never forgotten, and I have wondered and wondered when I should see him again, and under what conditions. Then he appears in a blaze of wealth and fame, but still, I cannot think that the past can be absolutely blotted from his memory. He has the same kind eyes and gentle voice—and he does not look quite happy, auntie."

Mrs. Bell smiled a little sadly and wistfully.

"I wish that Bryan Endicott had never returned to England at all," she thought.

CHAPTER XIV

BLACKGUARDS BOTH

THERE was a decided change in the weather next morning. The sky was overcast with dark clouds, and the wind was cold and gusty.

"We shall have rain to-day," remarked Mrs. Bell at the breakfast table. She regarded her niece anxiously. "It's a long journey to Tipton, and there is no means of conveyance. How will you manage it all the winter, darling? The works are most awkwardly situated between the two railway stations."

Vivien laughed.

"I'm a strong young woman," she answered, lightly, "and it won't rain every day, auntie. If the winter happens to be an exceptionally bad one we can get apartments at Tipton, though I should not like that."

She left for business in good time, and in excellent spirits, arriving a full ten minutes before the offices were open.

Shortly after nine Mr. Lumsden's rasping voice was heard in the corridor. He was scolding one of the juniors, and using rather strong language.

When he entered his own office he started at the sight of Vivien, and reddened, at the same time stepping forward, and holding out his hand.

"I am delighted to see you, Miss Bell. Miss Cornforth was afraid that you would be too ill to come for a day or two, and here I find you with blooming

cheeks. I almost called to see you last evening." He smirked, and caressed his whiskers. "Would you have been pleased?"

"You would not have found me at home, sir," was Vivien's equivocal answer. She went to her desk, and sat down without appearing to notice Mr. Lumsden's outstretched hand.

"I see you are bashful, and perhaps not pleased at the way I had to speak to Marsh. That boy would provoke a saint, and I unconsciously pick up a lot of words used by the foundry men. I will be more careful in future."

Vivien felt that her face was burning. How could she possibly endure this man? Her resolutions were already failing her.

"Your language is no concern of mine, Mr. Lumsden," she said, coldly.

"Oh, yes, it is, Miss Bell. I know you girls! Pretend a lot that you don't mean, eh?"

He busied himself with the letters, then uttered a sharp ejaculation as a cab rolled up, and deposited Mr. Heathcote at the gates.

"What the deuce—there I go again. Beg pardon, Miss Bell, but the old governor has arrived. I haven't known such a thing happen at this time in the morning for twelve years."

He closed his lips hard for a moment, and his small eyes contracted; then he strode off to Mr. Heathcote's office with a handful of letters.

He returned in a very short time, a satisfied smile on his face, and Vivien heard the cab go away again.

"The coast is clear for a bit," he remarked, drawing a chair to the fire, and sitting down. "You see that I don't scruple to make a confidante of you, Miss Bell, although you are a comparative stranger here."

He chuckled and rubbed his hands. "The fact is, this is a slice of luck, as I have several private matters of my own to attend to, and can rarely spare an hour, so arduous are my duties here. The young governor has had an accident at Deal," he concluded.

"Oh," exclaimed Vivien.

"You needn't look scared, Miss Bell. Would you look like that if I had such a misfortune? He only jumped into the sea to rescue a drowning boy, so Mr. Heathcote says, and he has contracted a lovely chill. Mr. Heathcote's off to see him, and I suppose that Miss Lennox will be going, too. He'll have nurses enough and to spare. Everybody knows that the old governor's daughter is dying for love of him. What a taste some women have got."

Mr. Lumsden gazed at his reflection in a glass on the mantelpiece.

"Then there is really not much the matter?" Vivien hazarded.

"Much the matter! I hope he's laid up for a few weeks. He's got a beast of a temper, as you'll find out if you cross him. No consideration for an old servant like myself, who has practically held the firm together for twenty years. He is the sort of man to squeeze the life out of you, and then toss you away like a sucked orange. But I've already taken care of myself, and when I do leave, it will be to settle down as a country gentleman. I've got my eye on a cottage at Sedgley, with a large garden, and a summer-house covered with vines and creepers. It stands detached from a nice little row of houses, and the lot are for sale. Now you wouldn't think that I could pay a couple of thousand down, would you?"

"I really know nothing about your affairs," answered Vivien, rather embarrassed.

"But you will some day, eh? I'm going to buy those cottages, and I'm going to settle down in the detached one, and be a landed proprietor, with a charming wife."

"I shall never be able to endure this horrid creature," thought Vivien, despairingly. The look almost of gloating in his pale eyes caused her to shiver.

"What work am I to begin with this morning?" she asked.

"I will instruct you when I am ready, Miss Bell. Don't be so impatient, my dear girl. It's a shame that those pretty hands should work at all. There will be very little work for you to do to-day, as I piled the regular work on to Cornforth yesterday and was here until midnight doing what you left undone. If you like, you can go for a walk, or read a novel, or do anything."

There was a tap on the door, and Marsh entered.

"Go away," cried Lumsden, harshly. "I will make a round of the general office directly."

He busied himself at his desk for a while, and then, rising, took up his hat.

"I am going out, Miss Bell, and leave you in charge of my office. I wouldn't trust anybody else, and you know why. Don't permit any of the clerks to touch my papers."

He gave her what he meant to be a killing glance, and departed.

"I cannot endure it," Vivien thought, for the twentieth time. "I never dreamed that it was possible to feel so much loathing and contempt for a fellow-creature."

Mr. Lumsden visited the heads of several departments, and issued his orders. Then he left the office, and strolled in the direction of an hotel whose principal customers were the neighbouring ironmasters.

It was known as the "White Horse," and contained excellent dining and smoking rooms.

Arrived there, Lumsden hastily scribbled a note, which he despatched by the porter, placing in his hand a shilling to ensure speed. He then called for a brandy and soda and a sixpenny cigar, reflecting complacently—

"I shall always smoke sixpenny cigars in the future, perhaps shilling ones. A man can never feel like a gentleman behind a twopenny smoke." He slapped his knees. "The luck is all my way at last, and, goodness knows, I've waited long enough for it. I shall capture the heart of the little beauty by storm, and her shyness and confusion only add zest to the siege. Not but what I could aim much higher in a social and financial sense, but I want something good to look at to put into my paradise. I know a dozen women ready to fall like ripe plums into the arms of Jacob Lumsden."

He flicked the ash off his cigar, and called for another brandy and soda.

"Gives a man courage, and sharpens his wits," he thought. "And I've got an artful one to deal with."

And so his reverie went on until the head of Lucas Starkey appeared round the door. The fierce eyes swept the smoke-room in one comprehensive glance, and an ugly smile flitted across the dark face.

"You sent for me, Lumsden?" he said briefly.

"Yes, of course. You have it in black and white. Nobody will think it odd that we should have a talk here. Friends and foes meet and shake hands every day in the smoke-room of the 'White Horse.' It's neutral ground."

Starkey threw himself into a chair, and glared at the clerk.

"You are getting along," he said, with a contemptuous glance at the brandy and soda. "Be careful. What's the news?"

"A dozen of these drinks won't upset me," was the resentful rejoinder. "And the news is decidedly good. As a matter of fact, now is your time to strike."

Starkey's face flushed a dull red, and the veins on his forehead stood out like knotted cords.

"Explain," he commanded harshly.

"Endicott has met with a boating accident, and I have the run of the place. Now it is for you to propound the scheme. And, mind you, Mr. Starkey, I shan't raise a finger until I have the agreed cash down—no cheques. Three thousand pounds, and not a penny less, whether you succeed or whether you fail. You have confessed that Endicott has beaten you clean out of the field. Your business is nearly wiped out, and now he has taken your promised wife from under your nose. I can imagine how you feel about it, because I'm going to get married myself soon."

Starkey had been thinking rapidly, and he held up his hand to check him.

"I admit that I under-estimated Endicott's strength, but the end is not yet. He shall never marry Miss Lennox. I would shoot him and her first."

He gripped one of Lumsden's wrists and bent nearer, his bloodshot eyes aglow, his wolfish mouth set in a straight line.

"Look here—I want copies of the plans of the works; copies of all the estimates for the past month; copies of everything likely to be of use to me. Supply these, and the money you want shall be given in exchange for them. Keep me posted regarding Endicott's movements, and you shall see what you shall see. I have heard that your firm is under a penalty of five

hundred pounds a day, unless a certain government order is completed within contract time."

Lumsden nodded.

"I want copies of all these things."

"Pshaw! The work will be done weeks ahead of contract time."

"We shall see," whispered Starkey. "There may be a strike—a riot. You are in charge for a while, and must dismiss a number of the men."

"I can't—I haven't the power. I——"

"We will see about that, and if I succeed in ruining Endicott and Heathcote—and I will do it, Lumsden—you shall have five thousand pounds. I don't care if I beggar myself, if they can be crushed among the ruins of my fortune. To-night you must begin operations, and to-night I will advance a thousand pounds. To-night, also, I shall address a mass meeting of gullible ironworkers in the Town Hall. You run no risk, and you net a comfortable little fortune. Your hand upon it, Lumsden; and if your heart weakens, if you fail me, look out for the vengeance of Lucas Starkey."

He showed his gleaming teeth, and almost crushed Lumsden's flabby hand to a pulp.

The clerk gulped down his brandy and soda, and smiled in a sickly fashion.

"If you keep faith with me, Mr. Starkey, I'll keep faith with you. I hate Endicott, and am bound to be dismissed soon, in any event. I'm not fool enough to miss the chance of my life."

"Good! You know where to find me until six o'clock. After that I shall be speaking upon different platforms until ten."

So saying, Mr. Starkey got up and left the room, making a chuckling noise in his throat which did not sound at all pleasant to Mr. Lumsden.

CHAPTER XV

"ANOTHER SHORT WEEK——"

MR. LUMSDEN smoked another sixpenny cigar, drank an appetizer, and then lunched at the hotel. It was the first time in his life that he had enjoyed himself so thoroughly in the company of gentlemen.

Several ironmasters had spoken or nodded to him, as the representative of one of the biggest concerns in the world.

"Sorry about Mr. Endicott's accident," said one. "Rather serious result anticipated, the paper says."

"What paper?"

"The 'Daily Post'—late edition. He was unconscious early this morning. Fell on the beach after rescuing some fool of a boy from drowning and struck his head against one of the groynes."

"Nuisance just now," Lumsden said. "You see, I am practically general manager, and I am about to marry and retire, for I've just had a large legacy left to me by an uncle in California, so it rather knocks my plans on the head."

It was nearly three o'clock when he returned to the works, and his gait was decidedly unsteady. He went into his office, puffing at the stump of a cigar, but immediately apologized to Vivien, at the same time making an elaborate bow.

Several queries lay on his desk, but he brushed them aside contemptuously.

"I can't be bothered to-day; I've had too much

to do already. Miss Bell, can't you be nice to a fellow? I've had a fortune left me—twenty thousand pounds—and I've bought an estate. I shall send in my resignation next week. The firm is going wrong; all the men are grumbling, and there's bound to be trouble. It isn't likely that Endicott's going to be allowed to bring in machinery that throws hundreds out of employment. It's all right for big countries like America, but it won't do in England, and he'll soon know it. I hear that he's got concussion of the brain, and is at death's door."

"Nonsense!" interrupted Vivien. "There is the latest paper. Mr. Endicott is in no danger, though he will be confined to his room for some days."

Lumsden regarded her in surprise.

"'Nonsense' to me," he exclaimed. "By Jove, Miss Bell, I should discharge you for insolence, if I didn't like your looks so much. Put your things on, and go home. There's nothing for you to do to-day, and I'll walk with you. I've got a beastly headache."

"If you speak to me in this way again I shall complain of your conduct to Mr. Heathcote," Vivien retorted angrily.

"Mr. Heathcote!" he mimicked. "That poor old woman. I'm a bit hasty, I admit, but you'll come round in time. Think no more about it."

He rang a bell, and Marsh appeared.

"You were listening at this door," Lumsden shouted, "and now you can get out without a character. Your duties have been shamefully neglected lately. Call on Saturday for your wages in lieu of notice."

"All right. I was listening at the door, and there are several in the office who don't mean to let you insult the ladies employed here. As for neglecting my duties, what about you? You have been in the

White Horse Hotel nearly all day with Mr. Starkey. The boots told me all about it."

Marsh vanished with a loud laugh, and Lumsden sat like one petrified.

"That is what one gets for kindness," he said at last. "I picked that boy up off the streets, and have put up with his laziness and impertinence for months past. If I have annoyed you, Miss Bell, I humbly apologize."

He appeared to have been completely sobered by Marsh's taunts.

"I must now attend to my arrears of work, and prefer to be alone. Before you go, say that you are not offended, Miss Bell."

"You certainly surprised me," Vivien answered, coldly. "Nothing more need be said if you treat me with proper respect in the future."

Mr. Lumsden was too bewildered to reply at the moment, but when Miss Bell was gone he gritted his teeth hard.

"I will attend to you later, miss," he muttered. "No matter, whatever I do I am safe. It is not criminal to copy a few papers. I think that my cunning is about equal to Starkey's."

Vivien exchanged a few words with Miss Cornforth in the general office before leaving for home, and the clerks glanced at her furtively as she passed out.

Marsh was waiting outside, and his manner was rather excited.

"Don't speak to me, Miss Bell, if you are afraid of him." He jerked his finger towards the office. "But I should like to tell you what I think about Lumsden."

"I'm not afraid of him," Vivien answered, contemptuously," and I am not interested in anything you may have to say about him. But you can walk a

little way with me, if you like, Mr. Marsh. I feel that I am in some way the cause of your dismissal."

"Oh, no," he protested, stoutly. "I couldn't have endured my place much longer. Lumsden has systematically kept me back, because my sister slapped his face once. He makes love in his offensive way to every girl he sees, the beast. But, do you know, Miss Bell, I'm sure that he's a bad man and a traitor. Everybody knows that Mr. Starkey hates Mr. Endicott like poison, and that he's always haranguing the workmen on Socialism and that sort of thing, although he pretends to be a Conservative. At these meetings he never forgets to drop words about the ruin that new-fangled machinery has brought to the country, and the seed is gradually taking root. Now, he really means the improvements at our place, or, rather, the new works, and why should Lumsden have private conversations with the enemy? I tell you he wants watching and I'm going to do it till I get him out of his job."

"Surely that would be very mean?"

"I don't think so. Of course, you are a new-comer, and don't know Mr. Endicott as I do. He's a gentleman, miss, and I'm not going to see him wronged."

"Neither am I," declared Vivien, with a vigour that considerably surprised him.

There was a short silence, then Marsh observed that he would not go any further.

"I may see you outside the office to-morrow, Miss Bell, and if you want proof positive of Starkey's game you should come to one of his meetings. There's a big, open-air affair to-morrow, to be held in the old fair ground in the evening."

"I think I will," said Vivien, for her interest was aroused. "Good afternoon, Mr. Marsh."

As she crossed the broad drive that led to Dudley railway station a cab sped by, and she saw that a pair of brilliant blue eyes were scanning her curiously. It was a young woman who occupied the cab, and beside her was seated a young man.

"There she is," the man said, half despairingly. "And from what Lord Rozenby says she is actually engaged at Endicott's works. You know what an eye Rozenby has for a pretty face, and he described your cousin exactly. Who on earth can be engineering the plot?"

"Ask me another, Dick," said Miss Lennox, white to the lips. "Perhaps this accident to Bryan is a lucky thing, after all. I shall persuade him to have the wedding at Deal, by special licence. I'm not going to be done. Miss Heathcote has kindly telegraphed for me, and you are to escort me, Dick."

"Yes," he answered, gloomily.

The cab stopped, and they alighted at the station entrance.

"I didn't tell you, Dick, that Rozenby told me that but for Endicott being in the way he would have asked me to be his wife. He called this morning, you know."

"Lord! What a chance you are throwing away. I always knew the fellow was half mad over you. Why don't you jump at the offer?"

"Because I like Bryan Endicott better," she laughed.

Dick Tyldesley went away to get the tickets, while Miss Lennox paced up and down the platform.

All at once she became conscious that someone was approaching from behind, and her heart sickened with dread. She knew the soft, catlike step only too well.

"Going to see your new lover, traitress?" said the

sibilant voice of Starkey. "Mark me, the dream will be a brief one. Bah! I have loved you almost to madness, but now I hate you almost as much as I hate him. Another short week and——"

He paused, laughing a hissing laugh, which made her feel as though a blast of frozen air had struck her.

CHAPTER XVI

COMING COMPLICATIONS

MR. LUMSDEN hardly addressed Vivien the whole of the next morning. She found plenty of work already placed upon her desk, and the machine clicked continuously to the scratching of the man's pen. He appeared to be both preoccupied and nervous, and now and again rose and walked to the window, from which he gazed with unseeing eyes.

She went to lunch with Miss Cornforth, and the girl rattled on in her loquacious style, until Vivien was nearly distracted.

"Did you read Mr. Starkey's speeches in the 'Post'?" she asked. "Two great overflow meetings he held, and my father says that he is sure to get the working man's vote. Wicked little viper to get into Parliament. But politicians seem to be licensed to do and say anything."

"I should like to see the man, and to hear him speak," Vivien said. "I am coming to the open-air meeting to-night. Mason, at whose house I lodge, and Marsh have offered to take care of me."

"Oh, that will be jolly. You will find me somewhere about, Miss Bell."

Vivien made an excuse to leave immediately lunch was over. She had one or two purchases to make in the town, and a weighty problem to consider. Hidden in her pocket was a little note from Marsh, reading as follows:

DEAR MISS BELL—You will hardly believe it, but Lumsden called at our house, and said I might come back if I liked. My father says I can please myself, and I shan't come back as long as Lumsden is there. If you can get as far as the waiting-room at the railway station after lunch I should like to see you. I hear from Mason that you will be at Starkey's meeting to-night, and the two of us are going to look after you, if you don't mind. It's sure to be a roughish crowd. You know what these foundry hands are, and there'll be a big proportion of miners among them.

Yours sincerely
CHARLIE MARSH

So Vivien went to the station, and found the young clerk there, his boyish face aflame with eagerness and pleasure.

"How do you do?" he said. "I thought it better not to be seen about the works, and I've got something to tell you. I told you that I should watch Lumsden, and one of my chums is doing the same. Well, he was hobnobbing with Starkey again last night, and he went back to the works, and was mouching about the office until midnight. I saw lights in Mr. Endicott's private room, and I'm certain that something crooked is going on. Besides, a score of the men didn't turn up to work to-day, and among them some of the foremen. Don't you think that somebody ought to write to Mr. Endicott? It's no use bothering Mr. Heathcote, as he has absolute faith in Lumsden."

Vivien's heart throbbed hard, and then seemed to stand still.

"I really don't know, Mr. Marsh." She felt her face burning. If Bryan Endicott's vital interests were really at stake?

"Suppose this should turn out to be a mare's nest? Even then no harm would be done. I wouldn't like

to talk to anybody else in this way, because I can't trust them. And if you don't write to Mr. Endicott I will. My father advises it, and he's a pretty cute man, Miss Bell."

Vivien hesitated.

"We will talk further about it this evening, Mr. Marsh, and by that time we may have something more definite to work upon. Mr. Lumsden has a perfect right to be upon friendly terms with Mr. Starkey, I suppose. The greatest of business enemies are meeting and dining together every day."

"All right! It seems that you are going to defend him. If that is the case——"

"I hate and loathe the man," she interrupted with spirit. "He has insulted me more than once."

"Then I'm satisfied," laughed Marsh. "He's a beast."

Mr. Lumsden was having high words with someone in the general office when Vivien passed through the corridor.

"It's no use blaming me, Parks," he was saying. "I have to obey orders. You, and the whole of the men in the small casting shop are laid off indefinitely. This telegram is my authority. No doubt they will take you on at Starkey's."

"This is Mr. Endicott's doing," shouted Parks. "I've worked for Mr. Heathcote since I was a boy. I'll get even with some of you."

Muttering savage threats, and shaking a grimy fist, a burly, dark-browed man strode out of the office.

"I'll see what my mates say to it," he shouted again, through the closing door.

Mr. Lumsden was very white, and his hands were shaking. He started at the sight of Vivien.

"I did not hear you come in, Miss Bell. I hate

people who creep about on the tips of their toes," he said, rather angrily.

Vivien did not deign a reply.

"You will excuse my show of temper," he went on, a little later, "but I am worried to death with Mr. Endicott's troubles, and I shall be glad to get away from them. Although we are actually short-handed, he has telegraphed to me to suspend some of the best of our men. He may have lost some of the contracts," he added, reflectively. "You had better make a dozen copies of this quotation. I have to go out for an hour."

He took a brown paper parcel from the safe, and carefully buttoned it up in an inside pocket of his overcoat, saying—

"Don't stay beyond your time, if I should be kept longer than I expect. And—Miss Bell, I am sure that there is trouble brewing here. If the men become dangerous, I shall close the works, and summon the police. In that event I will let you know in person. I know that I have vexed you, but I have meant no harm, and I want you to think well of me."

Vivien merely inclined her head. She was afraid to trust herself to speak.

The task left for her to complete did not take long, and her brain was busy all the time. She was convinced of one thing—there was a deep-laid plot afoot to ruin Bryan Endicott. Starkey was the master mind, and he had selected certain creatures as his tools, and chief among them was Jacob Lumsden.

"And I will try to save the sweetheart of my childhood," she thought, with a fierce, exultant joy.

At five o'clock she put on her hat to go home. She noticed that the clerks were talking together in undertones, and that the elder men appeared to be grave

and uneasy. The ironworkers were standing about the foundry yard in little excited groups.

As she walked into the road she heard a quick step behind her, and Mason was speedily by her side.

"Miss Bell," he said, sharply and seriously, "I wish you would give up the idea of attending Starkey's meeting to-night. To my mind there will be danger about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it looks like a riot, or something worse, and Mr. Endicott has only himself to blame. We have been told that wages are to be reduced, and old hands discharged, and public opinion is going over to Starkey."

"I shall be safe enough with you, and Mr. Marsh, and Miss Cornforth. I particularly wish to hear Mr. Starkey speak."

"If you are resolved——"

"I am quite resolved."

"Then I have nothing more to say. I shall be home in an hour's time, and Marsh is coming with me. Miss Cornforth will meet us on the wake ground at eight o'clock."

He returned to his work, and Vivien walked sharply homeward, with a strange feeling of exhilaration tingling through her nerves.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. STARKEY TALKS

A ROUGH wooden platform had been erected in the middle of the wake ground, and long before eight o'clock a great crowd of men had congregated They were a rough lot, indeed—an angry, unreasoning mob. Some growled threats and muttered words of fierce denunciation, while others listened sullenly.

Vivien and her companions kept on the very fringe of the crowd, so that in the event of a disturbance they could easily beat a retreat. The party was a full dozen strong, for relatives and friends accompanied both Marsh and Miss Cornforth.

At a few minutes to eight Mr. Starkey's car came into view, and a tremendous cheer went up. In response the politician waved his hat, and continued waving it until he had alighted.

"What a dreadful-looking man," murmured Vivien, with a shudder.

"He has managed to make himself very popular lately," Mason answered, meaningly.

Mr. Starkey mounted the platform, and after a brief introduction by the chairman, he began his address. He chose his words and his style to suit his audience, and gradually worked upon the feelings of the men until they were almost frantic. He had a powerful voice, which he knew how to use, and an impressive manner which seemed to carry truth with every gesture.

"Remember one thing, my men," he cried, in clarion tones. "If I am elected, I shall frame a Bill to stop the importation of machinery that robs the working man of his labour, and brings starvation to his crying children. By the introduction of these devilish contrivances wages are lowered, and thousands of men thrown out of employment. For what purpose? Why, to put money into the insatiable maw of foreigners."

His eyes blazed, and he shook his head savagely, while his voice rose to its utmost pitch.

"If I had my way these accursed inventions of foreigners should be blown to atoms, as a warning to others to keep their thieving hands off the rights of the working man."

A tremendous roar went up, almost like the booming of the sea, and Mason clutched at Vivien's arm.

"We had better get out of this, Miss Bell." His face was white, and his voice hoarse. "Where are the others? Oh, here they are. What do you think of it all?" he said to Mr. Cornforth.

"What do I think?" said the baker, scornfully. "It is all claptrap to mislead these shouting noodles. Those of us who know the inside of things haven't to ask twice who he's talking against. We shall have a riot, unless the law steps in pretty promptly. Starkey is a scoundrel."

"Still, he tells a lot of truth," retorted Mason, gloomily.

At that instant Mr. Cornforth's hat was smashed over his eyes, and a voice snarled—

"Mr. Starkey's a scoundrel, eh? Say it again, and mayhap it'll be a broken head next time."

The little party moved quickly away, and Mason advised that it would be well to return home by train.

"I'll come, too," announced Marsh. "It's early yet, and I shall enjoy the walk back."

He sidled up to Vivien, and whispered—

"I believe that Mason's gone over to the other side, and I want you to watch him."

The party separated at the railway station, and until the train was signalled Mason did not utter a word to his companions. By this time the platform was crowded with men who had been to hear Starkey speak, and they all appeared to thoroughly endorse every word that he had said.

Vivien discovered that she was trembling in every limb, and was glad to be seated in the moving train.

"Are you cold, Miss Bell?" Marsh asked.

"A little. I think it is through standing on the platform in the wind. You will come home with us, will you not? I want to introduce you to my aunt."

"With pleasure," the boy answered, his face flushing.

Mason paid no heed to their conversation; indeed, he hardly opened his lips until he stood at his own door. He let himself in with his latch-key, and wished Marsh good night in an abstracted manner.

Then he turned to Vivien, saying, with an odd laugh—

"Not much use going to the office to-morrow, I'm thinking. A dozen men were dismissed to-day, and half the rest have gone out with them. Mr. Lumsden wired to both Mr. Endicott and Mr. Heathcote, and I think that they see the hopelessness of the situation. At any rate, they won't see the red light."

The moment that Marsh was safely inside the sitting-room, and formally introduced to Mrs. Bell, he spoke his mind.

"It's all false; Lumsden has not telegraphed to

the principals, and he is in the pay of Mr. Starkey. We shan't see Lumsden again for some time, now that he has worked all the mischief possible. The scheme is to bring on a strike ; and once that is done, nobody will be able to restrain the men. I know from the correspondence I have read that Endicott & Heathcote will be ruined unless they can complete certain government contracts. The mob will be sure to destroy all the new plant that Starkey makes a point of condemning, and it will be all his doing, Miss Bell."

The boy stopped with a gulp, adding distressfully—

"We must do something."

"We will do everything possible," Vivien said. "I will both write and telegraph to the heads of the firm. How can they possibly dream of their peril, knowing nothing of the treachery of their trusted servant? If you could go to Deal by an early train, Mr. Marsh——"

"Just what I will do." He slapped his knee. "And in the meanwhile ? "

"Prompt action may save the situation, if the strike does not begin too soon."

Marsh stayed to supper, and when he left there was a complete understanding between him and Vivien.

Almost the last words he said were—

"I won't swear that Mason is a traitor, but he is intimidated by the others. He has been instructed not to open the works to-morrow, so you will have to get his keys, if you want to go in. I know this for a fact."

The same night Vivien wrote to Bryan Endicott, and every word came from her heart—

DEAR SIR—I believe that through the treachery of your managing clerk, a strike is imminent among your work-people, and that they will be joined by a gang of riff-raff organized

by your rival, Mr. Starkey. The object is to ruin you by demolishing the new works. Prompt action alone will save you. One of the junior clerks will leave by an early train to-morrow to explain to you how grave the peril is. You may remember me as the new typist.

E. Bell

It was nearly midnight when she went out to post this at a pillar-box close by.

When approaching the house on her return she saw the figure of a tall man flit along the street like a shadow, and she felt positive that it was Mr. Lumsden. He had most certainly left the house where she and her aunt were living.

Vivien crept in very silently. There were lights in the rooms occupied by the Masons, and Mrs. Mason was talking complainingly to her husband.

"You have been drinking with Mr. Lumsden, Tom, and you know how it always upsets you. I'm sure you won't be able to go to business in the morning, and who's going to admit the men?"

"Lumsden's got another set of keys," Mason hiccoughed, "and I ain't going, anyway. It's all up with Endicott & Heathcote, and you mind your own affairs. Here's ten pounds. That'll shut you up better than anything else. Lumsden gave it to me to keep the wolf from the door until the trouble's over, and he'll give me some more, too. I'm going to bed. Good night, old woman."

She heard him walk unsteadily into the bedroom, and his wife gathering up the money, and muttering to herself,

"I don't understand it, but I suppose it's all right."

"I ain't done murder, at any rate," he jeered. "And even if I had you'd take the money, I believe."

He finished with an oath, and fell over some obstacle

in the dark. Mrs. Mason jumped up, and followed him to see what was amiss, and Vivien seized the opportunity to take a great bunch of keys which hung against the wall just inside the living-room. She had intended asking Mrs. Mason for them, but there was the chance of being referred to Tom Mason.

Another minute, and she was safely in her own room, her heart throbbing wildly.

"Auntie," she said, as they bade each other good night, "I am going out very early in the morning, and I want to get up as quietly as possible, so don't you bother dressing, will you? I will bring you some tea. I don't want to disturb the Masons."

Mrs. Bell looked at her with troubled eyes.

"Is it right that you should run these risks, darling? What can a girl do against a mob of violent men?"

"Oh, a great deal. I want to see just what the enemy intends doing, and I may be able to get the police to interfere. So much is possible, because they do not suspect that Bryan Endicott has a single friend."

CHAPTER XVIII

BAD NEWS

WHATEVER concerns prominent men, whether for good or evil, is often exaggerated out of proportion by the imaginative reporters.

Bryan Endicott had met with a nasty accident, and he was feeling rather queer in consequence. He had hired a boat, intending to have a pleasant hour on the water, and when some distance from shore he had observed a young swimmer in difficulties. The boy had uttered a despairing cry and disappeared. Endicott rowed to the spot; then he had leapt fully dressed into the sea and caught the drowning lad. In the meanwhile his boat drifted away, and then began a struggle to the shore. He had arrived, breathless and exhausted, with his burden. There would have been nothing much the matter, had he not slipped on a stone and fallen against a groyne, head first. He was picked up insensible, and the most alarming news was circulated, the mildest of which was that he had concussion of the brain.

He was put to bed, and attended by a fussy young doctor, and the next thing he remembered was waking up with a splitting headache. He gazed about him in wonderment. There was a nurse in the room and the blinds were drawn. His head was bandaged, and he felt a trifle weak and dizzy.

"What's the meaning of all this?" he asked.

"You fell, and hurt your head badly, sir," the nurse answered.

"When was this?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday? Oh, I remember. There's a nasty taste in my mouth, too; I suppose I have been given some narcotic."

The nurse did not reply, and he relapsed into silence for a while.

At length he spoke again.

"Is Mr. Heathcote here?"

"No, sir, but he has been telegraphed for. Miss Heathcote is very much upset."

"Lord! Anybody would imagine that I was really ill. I've had worse knocks than this scores of times, and I should have been all right if they'd just put me to bed, and left me alone."

"The doctor had to take precautions against a chill, followed by brain fever."

"Brain fiddlesticks!" he growled.

"Here is the doctor, sir."

An immaculately dressed young man entered the room, and gazed with a paternal smile at his patient.

"Well, and how are we this morning?" he asked, with a self-satisfied smile.

Endicott looked up at him sourly.

"A feeling of nausea, a throbbing head, and general weakness. Fortunately, the temperature is little above the normal."

"You appear to know all about it."

"My dear sir, I'm your doctor."

"Worse luck."

The doctor looked alarmed. Was his patient's brain really affected?

"It has been a very close thing, Mr. Endicott. I

may say, without exaggeration, that I have saved your life, or at least an illness of many weeks by prompt action. Now, we shall have you right within a week or ten days."

"Nonsense," laughed Bryan. "Do you think that I'm going to lie here just because I'm told to? A cracked skull won't keep me in bed."

"My dear sir, are you aware that my professional reputation is at stake?"

"I don't care anything about that. I shall get up to-day. No more physic, please."

"Then I wash my hands of further responsibility," the doctor said, angrily.

"Of course. Good morning."

The young medico quitted the room in a towering passion, and Bryan summoned the nurse.

"I'll have my head bathed and bandaged, and then you can leave me. I intend getting up."

Within an hour he was downstairs, talking to Dorothy Heathcote, and Dolly was immensely relieved and pleased to find him so much better.

"There is really nothing the matter with me," he was saying. "This thumping headache and feeling of sickness will pass away. I'm sorry that you were induced to upset everybody by that fool doctor. Mr. Heathcote was needed at the works just now, and as for having Miss Lennox down here, that is the worst of all. Oh, I don't wish to mince matters, Dolly. We have merely patched up a foolish boy-and-girl romance, and if I really felt myself capable of caring for anyone else in a proper way, I should not go on with the business. Miss Lennox is taking me because, in her opinion, I'm a better man than Starkey."

"She may really care for you, Bryan."

"After her worldly fashion—yes; but had you not

been such a determined spinster, I should possibly have tried my fate elsewhere."

Miss Heathcote's face flamed.

"I could never have been satisfied with what you could give, Bryan. I have my own romance; and besides, I'm years older than you are. My dearest desire is to see you happy, but——"

"Yes, it is that horrible 'but.'" He turned to the window. "A miserable morning. I'd go out, and silence some of the scaremongers, but for the rain."

Mr. Heathcote was delighted to find his partner awaiting him in the sitting-room, that looked out upon the sea. Then his pleasure turned to indignation.

"The people who make false reports," he said, "ought to be punished for the agony of mind they cause. No news of importance, Bryan, and everything is gliding along on well-oiled wheels. Now that I am here I shall remain until Friday. I instructed Lumsden to send the letters twice daily by express delivery, so that we can keep in touch with all that is going on."

With the advent of Miss Lennox and Dick Tyldesley, Bryan's temper was by no means improved.

Feeling that he was in the way, Tyldesley went to an hotel, where he could follow his own inclinations without restriction, but not before he had warned his cousin that no time was to be lost.

Miss Lennox made the acquaintance of Dorothy Heathcote, and then announced that she must be allowed to attend to Bryan's requirements.

"I want nothing but peace," he grumbled. "I came here for rest, and a pretty mess I've made of it. Don't think me ungrateful, Vivien, but if there's anything I hate more than another it is to have a woman fussing about me. I'm not ill, and if the weather

improves again I shall go for a drive to-morrow, if the letters from the works do not occupy too much of my time."

The weather did improve again, and Bryan's recovery was so rapid that he declared there would be nothing at all the matter with him by the end of the week.

Letters and reports arrived twice a day from Lumsden, and everything was represented as being in perfect order.

"We shall get on without you, Endicott," Mr. Heathcote said, jubilantly. "So you may go on your honeymoon with a heart as light as air. Our staff is splendidly organized, and Lumsden is a jewel, although you don't like him."

"No, I can't take to the man," Bryan said, thoughtfully. There was a short silence, and he continued—"Vivien is very uncomfortable at the Tyldesleys', and as we have to marry, I suppose it may be now as well as any other time. She is afraid of her old lover." He laughed contemptuously. "I have consented to the wedding taking place at once, by special licence."

"If you are satisfied——"

"Why should I not be?" was the testy rejoinder. "There is a dash of romance about the whole thing at any rate. My heart is really wedded to my inventions."

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and strolled to the window. A youth was hastily approaching the house, and the figure appeared to be familiar.

"One of the boys from the general office, Heathcote," he exclaimed. "What the deuce does he want here?"

He went to the door himself, keenly scrutinizing the boy's flushed face.

"Come in, Marsh," he said, briefly.

"Then you are not very much hurt, sir."

"No. Now then, what is it? Sit down, and get your breath back. Don't let anyone interrupt us, Mr. Heathcote."

"Have you a letter from Miss Bell, sir?" asked Marsh.

"Miss Bell—who is she? Oh, I remember. No, I have not. Stay, the postman is just coming."

He stepped to the door, and Miss Bell's letter was handed to him. To read it, and to grasp the entire situation was the work of a very few minutes. He returned to the room occupied by Mr. Heathcote and Marsh, and passed the letter to his partner, who looked almost stupefied.

"You know the contents of that letter, Marsh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And why are you here?"

"To assure you that you must not waste a minute's time. Lumsden caused a lot of the men to be discharged, and gave notice of a reduction of wages. He has been doing everything else that is wicked, and boasts that he has made twenty thousand pounds out of it. You know, sir, that you have never been popular because of the labour-saving machinery, and it hasn't taken a lot to turn your own men against you—the majority are so prejudiced against these things. Miss Bell sent me here, and but for her I don't know what might have happened."

Endicott's brows came together, and he stood for a moment in deep thought.

"The cowardly scoundrel," he muttered. "So this is his revenge; but, like most clever villains, he has sailed a bit too close to the wind."

He took up a time-table, and coolly scanned one of its pages.

"I'm going to Tipton at once, Heathcote," he said. "A train leaves here in half an hour. I see that you are completely upset, and it will be wise to take matters calmly. I will telegraph to you. Come along, Marsh."

He put on his hat and coat, adding—

"Explain my departure as well as you can to the ladies, Heathcote. You have Miss Bell's letter; show them that."

So saying, he swung out of the house with Marsh at his heels, and first directed his steps to the police station. In his quick, incisive, almost dictatorial way, he instructed the inspector to telegraph to the Tipton police that a strike appeared to be imminent among the ironworkers, and that protection was to be sent at once to Endicott & Heathcote's works.

"My name is Endicott," he added, tersely, "and I'm going to Tipton now."

"The scheme is transparent enough, now that it is perhaps too late," he said to Marsh, when the train was steaming away from Deal, "but I never dreamt that Starkey would risk actual criminality, and I never dreamt that Lumsden was an active traitor. If that man can be got hold of, we will lay Mr. Starkey by the heels. It is a pretty conspiracy, but rather poor in execution. And I have to thank Miss Bell and you for giving me a chance to save——"

"Miss Bell has done everything," Marsh answered, warmly. "And I heard her say she would be at the works before six o'clock this morning to try and protect your property. She is going to lock the gates and keep the strikers out as long as she can."

Bryan listened in amazement.

"A woman to undertake this, and an absolute stranger to me. I hope to heaven that we may not be too late to save her from harm."

CHAPTER XIX

SAVING THE SITUATION

THE need was urgent; the danger was great—how great Vivien only realized in a dim kind of way. Had she been fighting for herself alone her courage would have forsaken her, but she was fighting for another—for the sweetheart of her childhood. There was no sleep for her that night, and after lying down for an hour or two, she quietly rose and dressed again.

The Masons slept in the room below, and every sound filled her with terror. She heard the man grumbling and groaning as men will when recovering from excess of the previous day. If he discovered the loss of the keys——

Five o'clock chimed, and soon the cheery whistling of men on their way to work, and the quick pattering of feet on the pavement below sounded in her ears. It would soon be time for her to start.

She crept down to the kitchen to boil some water for she had promised her aunt a cup of tea.

When she was returning, steaming kettle in hand, Tom Mason appeared, fully dressed, and he stared at her in amazement, then smiled feebly.

"I was just coming to get myself something to drink—some good strong tea. I've got a fearful headache this morning. Whatever brings you up so early?"

"I'm going out," she answered.

"Oh!"

"Yes, and I've got the keys of the works, do you hear? If you are coward and traitor enough to betray your employers, I am not. I heard all that you said last night, and I saw the scoundrel Lumsden leave here at midnight."

Mason's face turned deadly white.

"I am only doing what——"

"Allow me to pass, please. The water is getting cold."

Abashed and trembling, he stepped to one side, and Vivien went up to her own room.

She made a pot of tea, and poured it out with shaking hand. Her heart seemed to lie dead and cold, but her determination never faltered. She was not afraid of Mason now. The coward would not dare to oppose her.

She took a cup of tea to her aunt, and endeavoured to appear calm and cheerful.

"I'm going now, auntie. It will soon be daylight, so there is nothing to be afraid of. Oh, I don't expect to be very late, because the police will surely be sent to the works by mid-day, at latest."

She went downstairs, and out into the street, to find Tom Mason waiting there.

"I suppose that you are going to tell Mr. Lumsden that the plot is discovered?" she said, scornfully.

"No, I'm going to protect you," was the sullen rejoinder.

"I would rather you did not. I cannot trust you."

"I shall send Lumsden's filthy money back again, if I risk my life doing it. I didn't join him willingly. I was over-persuaded. Come on, we'd better hurry, and I'll tell you what I know of the game as we go along."

He was silent for a few minutes, then continued—

"Since Mr. Endicott gave notice that all wages were to be reduced, and discharged half the men, his fate has been practically settled. He's looked on as the bitterest enemy that the working man has ever had. If he's allowed to go on in this way, they say, the country will soon be full of his contrivances, and the poor workers may as well be buried and done with. Look at the men out of work in Tipton already."

"What proof have you got that the men were discharged by Mr. Endicott's orders? What proof have you that he intends reducing the wages? I cannot believe it, because I know that the firm is refusing large orders because of the scarcity of skilled labour. The men should have approached Mr. Endicott, and heard his intentions from his own lips before deciding upon a strike."

"You may be right, but I've got nothing to do with that. I was ordered to do certain things, and I was terrified. The scheme is to destroy the machinery—to completely wreck the works with dynamite that is kept in a big safe in the private office. The trouble begins soon after daylight this morning, and some thousand men will march on the works. So you see the risk that we are running. Rioters have no more regard for human life than soldiers in battle, and they're ten times more desperate."

"Oh, is it as bad as that? Oughtn't we to go to the police at once?"

"What's the use? They couldn't send more than a dozen men, and the sight of them would only make the mob worse."

They both came to a halt involuntarily, for a distant boom rumbled through the fresh morning breeze.

"I shouldn't wonder if that isn't the signal to start from the old fair ground, where they were to assemble

at five this morning," said Mason, in a quaking voice.

The works were in full view now.

"If you are afraid, it isn't too late to turn back. I'm going to face these men, and talk to them."

He glanced at her pityingly.

"No use talking to Starkey's paid ringleaders. Let's run for it. The big steel gates, the offices, and safe are all to be left open. We can at least lock them out, and destroy the dynamite."

The booming of thousands of voices again pulsed on the air—nearer—nearer.

"One thing you must promise me, Miss Bell, if we are to come out of this all right—I don't want it known that I threw in my lot with the rioters."

They ran panting up to the huge steel gates just as the advance guard of the mob turned a corner of the road, not five hundred yards distant. A terrible roar went up, and every man appeared to be brandishing a club, or weapon of some kind.

One of the gates swung open when pushed, and immediately they were inside Mason secured them with locks and bars. They were fully fifteen feet high, and surmounted by a massive stone arch, and a tower, where hung a large bell. The works themselves formed three sides of a square, with the offices on the front. The buildings were all lofty, with steel-barred windows, and almost as impregnable as a fortress.

"Their only way in now is to climb the tower," gasped Mason, "or batter down the gates into the canal. I don't think they'll try to get in that way, as they would have to go back a mile for boats."

At that moment the leaders realized that they had been betrayed, and a perfect fusillade of stones

crashed through the office windows. The hooting and booing was ear-splitting. Vivien and Mason crouched in a corner. All at once the noise ceased, and one of the leaders harangued the mob.

"The gates must be forced," he roared. "Now for battering rams, and no mercy to the traitors inside."

A face was pressed to the bars of the office window where Vivien and Mason were hiding, and a wild cry went up—

"The timekeeper! The timekeeper!"

Mason darted to a tall safe built in the wall, and hauled out a small iron-bound box filled with dynamite.

"Can you manage one end of this, Miss Bell?" he asked. "If you can we'll drop the lot into the canal."

There was another shower of stones, and one missed Vivien's head by an inch or so. Another hit Mason on the jaw, and cut his cheek to the bone. He hastily bound a red handkerchief round his head, and went on.

"They're going to try and prise open the window bars, so we'll hide somewhere in the works. We might get away by crossing the canal, but I've no doubt that every way is guarded by pickets."

The box of dynamite was carried to the wharf, and dropped into the canal. Then Mason proceeded to rake out the fires from under the boilers, as steam was nearly up.

"A lot of the best machinery could be destroyed by setting the engine to work," he explained, "and if there's no steam they will be stopped at that."

"I see now that I should have been almost useless alone," Vivien said, holding one hand to her side. It seemed that her heart must burst, so painful was its beating. "And you are badly hurt, too, Mr. Mason."

"I deserve it," was the grim answer. "But for

you, I should have been at home now, and Endicott's works would have been a wreck." He looked at his watch. "Only half-past seven. It might be ten o'clock!"

A great roar shook the air. Then came heavy blows.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

They crept nearer to the gates, almost fascinated, but keeping well in the shelter of the walls.

The gates shook, but showed no sign of giving way.

"Longer poles," shouted a hoarse voice, "and we'll smash the arch down, and climb the gates. Quick, or we shall have the bobbies here from the whole countryside."

"Heavens!" cried Mason, aghast. "I believe that is Starkey himself. Surely I know his voice. If it is you may reckon that he's gone clean daft."

Vivien collapsed. The hooting and yelling throbbed in her brain. These furious human beings inspired her with greater terror than a pack of wild beasts would have done.

"Another stop, Miss Bell, but I'm afraid that it will be the last. The arch must go down if they do as they say, and we shall be fools to remain here."

He started back to the wharf, and Vivien followed blindly. Cautiously he unbarred the gates that opened on the canal, and glanced up and down. To his amazement no one was in sight.

"A chance," he cried hysterically. "Jump into the boat, Miss Bell, and I'll pole it to the other side. It's fortunate that there's a boat here."

He assisted Vivien aboard, and loosing the boat guided it to the opposite side of the canal with a steel-pointed shaft kept for the purpose.

Hardly had they set foot on the tow-path when they saw a body of men advancing at a run. They

were nearly a quarter of a mile away, but the thud-thud of their feet sounded with the regularity of soldiers at the double.

"The police!" Mason cried, joyfully. "We are safe now, Miss Bell. And there are hundreds of them."

CHAPTER XX

THE END OF THE TROUBLE

"THEY haven't got in yet," said the chief of police, calling his men to a halt. He held a powerful glass to his eye as he spoke. "But the brickwork is beginning to give way. Bring that man and woman here."

Mason promptly advanced, and Vivien kept close to him.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the chief, after ordering his men to cross the canal at once.

"We have just escaped from the works," said Mason. "We are both employed here, and heard of the plot to wreck the machinery. We arrived first, secured the gates and doors, and destroyed the dynamite. You will find it under the water in the tongue of the wharf."

"Um! That's your story, and it remains to be proved. I shall have to detain you both for the present."

Two men were left with Mason and Vivien, and just as the chief landed on the other side the bell tower and the stone arch fell in with a crash, followed by yells and cheers.

"Confound you!" one of the officers said to Mason. "I wanted to be in this fun." He spoke good-humouredly though. "It'll cool 'em down a bit when they see our chaps in there. They'll find the Birmingham men behind 'em, too. We've come from Wolverhampton."

"How did you hear the trouble was coming?" asked Mason.

"I don't know. Somebody gave the information last night. There our chaps go."

He slapped one knee excitedly, for a howl of rage and disappointment came from the rioters when they mounted the gates and saw scores of policemen in the works awaiting them. Half a dozen had incautiously dropped into the enclosure, and were promptly secured.

"It's all over," cried Mason. "The works are saved."

And Vivien felt that she would faint right away.

From the road beyond the works there were sounds of a sharp struggle. The more desperate of the men were being dispersed by a company of mounted police, and in the end some fifty or sixty were arrested. They were told, too, that the military had been called out, and that the Riot Act would be read unless there was an immediate end to the disturbance. Within two hours the streets were clear, and the riot was completely subdued.

The chief signalled to his men to bring Mason and the young lady across the canal, and expressed his regret at their detention.

"I have found your statement to be quite correct," he said, "and you are at liberty to go. Kindly leave me your names and addresses. Messrs. Endicott and Heathcote owe the salvation of their machinery to you."

"Thank you, sir," Mason answered. "May I ask a favour? The young lady is completely unstrung, and unable to walk to Dudley. Will you allow one of your men to fetch a cab?"

The request was granted, and an hour later Vivien

was in bed in a state of semi-delirium, for the reaction had set in.

It was nearly two o'clock when Bryan Endicott and Marsh alighted at Tipton railway station. They saw at a glance that the shop windows were shuttered, and that knots of idlers stood gossiping at the street corners.

"It's all over, I'm afraid, sir," groaned Marsh, while a sob struggled in his throat.

A middle-aged man stepped up to Endicott, and said with some emotion—

"Let me be the first to congratulate you, sir. My name is Cornforth, and my daughter is engaged at your place. The riot was stopped just in the nick of time. I put the police up to the scheme, as far as I knew it, last night, but you owe everything to Miss Bell. She's about the most heroic young lady I've heard of, and so quiet and pretty too."

"This is good news, Mr. Cornforth, if true," Bryan said, quietly.

"It's as true as gospel, sir. The mob has only damaged the bell tower over the gates. A score of police have been left in charge, and the information has been laid that Mr. Starkey was at the head of the rioters, disguised as a workman. He meant to ruin you at any cost. It's a terrible story that you've got to hear soon."

"I hope that none of my people are hurt?"

"There are not many of them worthy of your consideration," Mr. Cornforth said, contemptuously.

Bryan went to the police station, and the superintendent smiled.

"It was all over when we got your telegram, Mr. Endicott," he said, "and there is not much damage done. You owe a fortune to the cuteness and courage of your lady clerk, and the timekeeper, Mason."

"Thank you," Bryan answered. "I will go over the works, and try to get to the bottom of this affair."

"It appears to be business rivalry and misrepresentation, and you know how a lot of so-called working men are led by the nose. They really want to live without work, and are ready to listen to any yarn. These chaps are the curse of the real workers who want to get on."

"They are just as easily handled the other way by kindness and firmness," said Bryan, with a smile. "I expect I shall have to see you pretty often for a while, Superintendent. Good day."

He next went to the telegraph office, and wired to Mr Heathcote—

All is quiet, and very little the matter.—ENDICOTT

During all this Marsh had been indulging in little chuckles, and almost audible "Hoorays." Several times he had tossed his cap up into the air, and with the utmost difficulty restrained himself from shouting with joy.

"May I come to the works with you, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly, Marsh."

"It's funny how everybody stared at you, Mr. Endicott. I expect it's that bandage round your head. I suppose they think you were in the fight this morning."

"Ah, I had forgotten that."

Bryan soon assured himself that not a finger had been laid upon the machinery, and that the entire damage would be covered by a hundred pounds or so. Before he left the office, however, a rough report of the origin of the riot was sent to him by the superintendent. He smiled grimly when he read it.

"Starkey made a desperate move at the last," he thought. "And he evidently found ready tools among the people whom I trusted here. I have known for some time that Starkey was practically a ruined man. I offered him a fair price, and he has now got nothing for what he swindled my father out of. The next thing to do is to regain the confidence of the rest of the real workers—to disprove the scandalous things that have been said and done in my name, and to put some new blood into them. How long? Bah! The works shall be in full swing again within a week."

He was seated in the private office, and he suddenly became aware that someone was looking through one of the broken sashes.

"By Jove, Endicott," said the voice of Lord Rozenby. "I half believed that I was looking upon your immortal ghost. The news of the riot only reached my place a short time ago, and I at once came over to see if I could be of any use—and I find you seated here, after being reported as nearly dead at Deal."

"Come in—not through the window, though. The rioters have twisted some of the bars out, I see."

Rozenby was genuinely concerned.

"Then your illness wasn't so bad, after all?" he asked, striding into the office and shaking hands.

"A cracked head," laughed Bryan. "That's all. I've had a lot worse."

"I'm not wasting your time, I hope," said Rozenby, glancing at the paper-littered desk.

"No, I have about finished for the day. Have been outlining my scheme for tackling this unexpected proposition. You have heard that Starkey has practically ostracized himself, if nothing worse? I'm not vindictive, and I can afford to pity him now."

"What an escape Miss Lennox had."

"Yes," said Bryan, indifferently.

Lord Rozenby looked up quickly, and a look of something like anger came into his eyes.

"She is at Deal, I hear?"

"Yes, alarmed by the newspaper reports. Will you have a cigar, Rozenby?"

"No, thanks, not just now. Look here, Endicott, it's no business of mine to lecture you, but I think you care more for these beastly factories than for the girl who is going to be your wife. Now don't you think that it is a bit rough on the girl?"

"Miss Lennox thoroughly understands," Bryan answered, coldly.

Rozenby fidgeted about for a few minutes, and then said—

"Let me be perfectly candid with you, Endicott, and what I am going to say should die with me if I thought you cared two straws for Miss Lennox. I have worshipped Vivien—if you will let me call her so for a moment—for a long time, and until you came on the scene I fully intended winning her from Starkey myself. Of course, I've heard of that ridiculous episode of your young days, but I think that you ought to look the facts of the present in the face."

"Perhaps you are right; but Miss Lennox seemed to be satisfied. I'll think it over."

"Don't get tired of my persistency—only one question more. Don't you think that it would be a relief to both of you if Miss Lennox released you? Now, tell me, old man, straight from your heart."

"Yes, Rozenby, honour bright, I believe that it would." Bryan rose from his chair. "I'm going to the hotel, Rozenby, and you shall take me in your trap; I feel a bit fagged, and quite peckish."

He called to Marsh, who was in the next room.

"Let me have Miss Bell's address, please."

"Yes, sir."

"And, Marsh, you and I will have to be busy here to-morrow. Meet me at ten o'clock."

He went out with Lord Rozenby, and found a number of working men standing round the gates. Some of them looked at him sullenly, while others touched their caps. There were probably fifty or sixty of them, and he went into their midst.

"All this is a great pity, men," he said, in his resonant voice, weighted with a mingling of regret and determination. "Still, you can all return to your work, but not later than next Tuesday, and not one of you shall lose a penny of wages. I have never given instructions for one of you to be discharged, or to have your wages reduced; indeed, I was increasing the wages of all competent men who make an effort to get out of the old ruck, and as for men being out of employment, you know that we are short-handed here. It is only those who won't do their best who have nothing to do. I, and you, have been made the victims of a conspiracy, which has not ended very badly for us, after all. Wages will be paid in full on Saturday, at the usual time."

Some of the men sobbed, and some of them cheered, while some of them looked away abashed.

"That was a master stroke," said Lord Rozenby, as they drove away together.

"I have been dealing with larger bodies of men for a long time," was the reply. "A little generosity is worth more than an ocean of words."

"You will come with me to Greystoke?"

"Not to-day, thanks. I have a call to make in Dudley this evening. You shall drop me at the

'Dudley Arms.' To-morrow, perhaps, if you are at liberty."

"I want to have a talk about Greystoke. I may say that I would never have entertained the idea of selling, had not Miss Lennox taken such a fancy to the place."

Bryan alighted at his hotel, gripping Rozenby's hand with more than his usual cordiality. He had heartily disliked the young man at first, but now there was a strong bond of sympathy between them.

Bryan's first care was to dine; then he made his outward appearance a little more presentable, and sent for a doctor to put some clean bandages about his injured head.

"How long must I go about in this state?" he asked. "Make it as short as possible."

"Two or three days. The wound is healing nicely."

"Thank you. You will look after me?" The doctor was only too pleased to get such a patient.

After writing half a dozen letters Bryan went to pay his visit to Miss Bell.

CHAPTER XXI

STARKEY SURRENDERS

BRYAN was, perhaps, the coolest man for miles round that evening. He heard the Tipton riot being discussed at almost every step. Newsboys, with bundles of "Extra Specials," were yelling about it, and men standing under lamp-posts, and in the lights of shop windows, reading the latest news concerning it.

But Bryan only shrugged his shoulders, and laughed to himself. He knew the worst of it, and there was little harm done, except to the men who had schemed to ruin him. Let the papers say what they liked. He had to admit, though, that he was distinctly puzzled as to certain other matters. He had hitherto prided himself on mapping out a straight course, and adhering to it. As far as the business of the ironworks was concerned he felt that he could now overcome all obstacles as easily as flicking a fly off the window-pane. But this engagement with Vivien Lennox—why had he been so weak as to drift into it? He had agreed to marry her because she was Vivien Lennox, and for no other reason. Had she borne any other name he would not have looked at her twice. And Lord Rozenby had told him that he loved and longed for her, so it was a pity that Lord Rozenby couldn't have her.

"I must talk to her plainly, kindly, and calmly, but I must point out the folly of gambling one's life on mere sentiment, and explain that no woman can really come between me and my beloved inventions.

After a little we should drift apart, and be a nuisance to one another. She may—ah ! this is Mason's place, and Miss Bell lives here with her aunt. I want to thank the young lady for what she has done for Endicott & Heathcote, and see how I can best reward her. She must be a very uncommon young woman. And I must do something for Mason, too."

The door was opened by Mrs. Mason, who recognized the visitor the moment the light from the hall showed his face.

"I have called to see Mr. Mason, and also a young lady named Bell, who has apartments here."

"Yes, sir. Will you please to come in? I am Mrs. Mason, and I know that you are Mr. Endicott. Tom will be here in a minute."

She showed Bryan into the parlour, turned up the gas, and left the room. Mason came in almost immediately, but his face was white, and his voice shook.

"I have come to thank you," Endicott began kindly, but the man interrupted him.

"Don't, sir. I was really as bad as the worst of them—I even took money from Lumsden, but Miss Bell, from upstairs, showed me my duty. I'm not going to sail under false colours ; I thought that you were in the wrong, and threw in my lot with the others. I now see what a fool I have been."

"You have the courage to own it, at any rate, and that is quite enough for me, Mason. Let everything be forgotten, and don't neglect your work in future. Now I want to speak to Miss Bell."

Mason's heart was too full for words, but he ran upstairs, and tapped on Mrs. Bell's door, Endicott following him closely.

Mrs. Bell opened the door, and stammered something about her niece being unwell. Her eyes never

left her visitor's face, and he wondered why she was so troubled and trembling.

She asked him to walk into the sitting-room, and he did so, saying—

"I am quite disappointed. I hope that Miss Bell is not seriously indisposed."

"She was half delirious when she came home—the strain had been so great, but she is sleeping now. The doctor says that she must have absolute quiet for a day or two."

"In that case I will not trouble you again until Saturday. Will that do, Mrs. Bell?"

"Oh, yes—at least, I think so."

"I naturally take a deep interest in one who has done so much for a mere employer." He smiled. "Good evening, Mrs. Bell."

Bryan Endicott was at the works early the next morning. He saw no use for the guard of police, and the men were dismissed. He waded through the letters, and interviewed sympathetic callers. Scores of curious people came to view the battle-ground of the poor little riot; but by mid-day workmen were busy repairing the damage done, and all arrangements were completed for every department to be in full swing again on the following Monday.

Bryan went to lunch at the usual hour and to the usual place, and was amazed to discover Starkey in the dining-room. His first impulse was to retire, but he checked it and took his seat.

"I wonder if there is any foundation to Mr. Cornforth's story concerning that fellow," he thought. "Really, I can hardly help admiring him."

Then he took up a copy of the "Birmingham Post," and saw that certain allegations against Mr. Starkey were already in print.

"I know what you are reading, Endicott," said Starkey, with a savage smile. "I have just read that accumulation of lies myself, and more will be heard of it. We are alone," he added, glancing round the room, and lowering his voice, "and I believe that we are open enemies. We hate each other with a cordiality that is refreshing, and a woman, as usual, is at the bottom of it. I confess that I have tried to ruin you, and failed. I have done my best to work the men up to it, and now I am sorry for the damage that has been done. Endicott, will you permit me to bear the expense—the total loss?"

"I should not like to touch your dirty money, Starkey."

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please. You have beaten me in the first stage of the game and I'm going to let you have the old works back at your own price. Whatever you care to give over and above the claims of the mortgagee shall be distributed among the poor fellows who have been injured. I bind myself to do this. As for that story of the disguise, it is too thin. I was a hundred miles away at the time, but I know who is responsible for it." His jaws snapped together. "A rat whom I fed and kept—a rat, who now rats to save his own skin. No other, sir, than Mr. Heathcote's old foreman Mortimer Scott, whom you discharged."

"I'm not surprised. The man is eaten up with Socialism, a fool-name used by seditious scoundrels who hate law, order, and all advancement. Otherwise he is a bright, capable fellow. I shall not prosecute. I have no desire to dirty my hands with your pupils."

There was a brief silence, and Starkey watched his rival with a sullen gleam in his eyes. His heavy jaws

were set firmly, and now and again a faint smile flitted about his lips.

"Is it a bargain, sir?" he asked. "The old works are yours for the amount of the mortgage. I have all the necessary documents prepared, and leave you master of the situation. You have taken from me the woman that I once loved—bah! I hate her now—you have recovered all that I—well, *got* from your father, and beaten me at every point. You accept? I see the light of victory in your eyes. I hoped that you could find it in your heart to pity me a little. Pity me! I can afford to be amused even now, and I can almost pity you." He jumped to his feet. "It's good-bye now, Endicott. My lawyers will communicate with you. I have been to the works for the last time this morning."

There was something like a sob in his throat, but he tossed back his mane of black hair in the old savage way, and bared his white teeth.

"And when we meet again—when—when—well, then perhaps——"

He quitted the room chuckling, and Bryan heard him laughing as he passed the window.

"I think his disappointment must have affected his head," he thought, rather pityingly, and went on with his lunch.

CHAPTER XXII

MORTIMER SCOTT—SOCIALIST

Mr. Starkey was true to his word. The next day an imposing packet of legal documents was in Bryan's hands, accompanied by the following characteristic note :—

> You may take back what has been a curse to me Your solicitor and mine can soon negotiate the transfer—the sooner the better. I have sufficient left to keep me in comfort, and I shall be quite content to sit on the fence for a little while and see the fun. The race is not always to the swift.

Bryan tossed the note aside with a laugh, but he had cause to remember it later.

It was only natural that he should be exhilarated by this unexpected turn of fortune's wheel. The riot and its disastrous threatenings had proved, after all, a sort of blessing in disguise.

There were letters from Mr. Heathcote and Vivien, and it must be confessed that these gave him very little pleasure.

"We are all coming home to-day," Mr. Heathcote wrote. "The mere suspense is something like torture. Miss Lennox has consented to be our guest until the wedding."

"The wedding!" Bryan growled. "I have no mind for weddings just now, and I really can't have Heathcote fussing about here."

He turned to Vivien's letter, and read it with a mixture of tenderness and annoyance.

MY DARLING—I have trembled for your safety, and now that the danger is past I am as weak as a little child. Mr. Heathcote declares that it will not be possible for you to get away from the works in a crisis of the kind, and I have insisted upon returning to you at once. I want you to give me the right to be near you always—I want nothing to interfere with our immediate marriage. You know that I do not care for what they call a society wedding, because you have no liking for such things. In storm, in sunshine, my dear one, I live for you only.

"So I suppose I shall have to face the music," Bryan thought remorsefully.

He looked from the office window at the tall block of chimneys behind the new works, and his eyes grew dim.

"Mine—mine at last. The dear old playground. My heritage by right. I can almost fancy that my father's spirit has never rested in peace until now."

There was a knock on the door, and Miss Cornforth entered the room. Bryan looked at her with a smile.

"It will be hard work to-day," he said, "with all this confusion around us. There are dozens of letters which ought to be attended to, but they will have to wait until Monday. Therefore you may take matters quietly this morning, Miss Cornforth. I thought that the head clerk understood this."

"I wish to see you about something else, sir," the girl said, and then he noticed that her face was very pale. Bryan was instantly alert.

"If I can grant you a favour, Miss Cornforth, consider that it is done."

"Oh, I am so glad," she said, tremblingly. "It is about Mortimer Scott, sir."

Endicott frowned.

"What about him?"

"He wishes to speak to you, sir. I want you to hear him, because I am sure that he—he is penitent."

Bryan's expression was one of surprise.

"Would you mind telling me what Mortimer Scott is to you, Miss Cornforth?"

"We were engaged until he left your employ," she stammered, "and then my father objected."

"Ah! I understand. Very well, I will hear what Scott has to say."

The girl withdrew, and a minute or two later Endicott was looking into the sullen eyes of his late foreman. He was a strong-looking man of thirty or thereabouts, well-featured, square-jawed, and obstinate. He held a letter in one of his big, knotty knuckled hands.

"It's like this, sir, Maggie Cornforth would have me come to see you. We are old sweethearts, and we should have been married next Whitsun, and maybe we shall now—that is, if I care to cotton to the old man."

"Get to the point, please," Endicott interrupted brusquely.

"I'm coming to that, and I'm eating humble pie. I'm out of work, sir, and nobody in the Black Country will give me a job after what's happened. Mr. Starkey's left me in the lurch, and here's the letter saying so."

"You have no one but yourself to blame, Scott. As a workman you are a good man, otherwise you are little better than a fool."

"That's a hard word, mister, but you've got all the say on your side. I've acted according to my lights. Starkey's thrown me over," he added, wrathfully,

striking the letter with his fist, "and he has the gall to tell me in here that he has begged of you not to prosecute me. Why, the old rascal engineered the riot himself, and dressed up as a workman in a suit of my clothes." He laughed savagely. "But I don't mind about that; I've got summat against him —summat in writing—summat——"

"I have no interest in your private quarrels, Scott. You held a responsible post in my works, and would still have held it, had you not tried to set your influence against mine. You objected to new machinery, and tried to work upon the men under you. You preached Socialistic rubbish to all who were silly enough to listen to your visionary schemes. I have no vacancy for you at present, and in any event the situation will be a very subordinate one, until I regain confidence in you."

There was an acute silence for several minutes, and Scott's chest heaved convulsively.

"I can't take such a place," he said, speaking with an effort. "I came here to do you some good, if you cared to strike a bargain."

"Oblige me by leaving the office, Scott," Endicott answered quietly, though there was a gathering storm in his eyes.

"Don't say that, mister. I've got some writing that means a lot to you. Starkey left it on my mantelpiece when he changed his clothes. I want to be friendly, and forget that you're one o' them American millionaires that form trusts to the ruin of the working man. I know it's your game to get all the ironworks in Tipton under your control, and have everybody at your mercy, and I'll be fair to you."

Endicott rose to his feet, and pointed to the door.

"Go," he said, "and at once."

"You'll regret it, mister. And don't lay no hands on me, because two can play at that game."

Almost before he was aware of it he was spun round and shot through the doorway into the passage, cursing and threatening.

"I wouldn't raise a finger to save you now," he shouted. "You took me unawares, or your fancy tricks wouldn't a' gone with me."

He stood in the corridor until Maggie Cornforth tearfully coaxed him away.

"His heart's made o' flint, and nothing else," he said. "Come away from the works along o' me."

"No, it must be all over between us, Morty. I'm sorry that I ever saw you. You have quarrelled with everybody. You have been drinking now; I'm sure of it."

"And what if I have? I didn't ask none o' your people to pay for it, did I? A nice light o' love, you are! You turn against me for a stranger. But let me tell you this, lass—I'm his master."

She laughed rather sadly, and said, drawing herself up—

"I have wasted years of my life on you, and this is all I've got for it. Now I've lost my situation, too."

"I'm glad of it," was the dogged reply.

Her eyes flamed with anger.

"It's good-bye now, Mortimer Scott, and I will never speak to you again as long as I live."

"I guess I can do without you."

"You are an evil-tempered, callous brute."

She left him hastily, a sob in her throat, and he stood with his back to the wall, watching her.

"Maggie, Maggie," he called, "I'll get away from here, away from Tipton, and go where I can think

matters over a bit. Say good-bye to me nicely, lass. We have loved one another too long for strangers to come between us."

But she did not heed him, and he shook his big fist at Endicott's office.

"I was all right until he came here, and he laid his hand on me, he did. I'd go back, and have it out now, if it wasn't for Maggie. Never mind, my turn'll come." He slapped his pocket and laughed. "And then we'll see on which side o' his face he grins most."

He lurched off to a public-house, where he was something of an oracle among the ragged loafers who lived mainly upon cheap drinks and casual coppers.

CHAPTER XXIII

BRYAN CALLS

ENDICOTT spoke kindly to Maggie Cornforth when he saw her in distress.

"You must not take this affair too much to heart. Life is made up of pleasures and troubles—mostly troubles. Scott has been led away by a class of agitators who ought to be suppressed by law. He has himself been guilty of a great crime, and I suppose that he would suffer imprisonment with all the self-glory of martyrdom, if he were punished as he deserves to be. You are fond of the fellow, Miss Cornforth?"

"We were to have been married, sir," she said, half hysterically.

Bryan stared thoughtfully before him.

"He was impertinent and aggressive, but I will do something for him when he is in a better frame of mind. He is a man of strong character, and when compared with a treacherous hound like Lumsden he can be somewhat admired. Yes, Miss Cornforth, I'm sure that Scott will soon find out the error of his ways."

The girl looked grateful.

"I was afraid that you would not want me any more, sir, after—after his impudence. I had no idea he had been drinking, or he shouldn't have come here at all."

"Do without you? Nonsense! I shall always remember you as one of my most faithful workers. We are short-handed, too, and Miss Bell may not be back for some days. Now dry your tears, and let

Master Scott alone for a bit. I shall not forget him when the proper time arrives, if only for your sake."

Maggie Cornforth flushed with pleasure.

"Oh, thank you, sir. Mortimer was not always like he is now. He has been a good son to a widowed mother, and at one time he held a Bible Class every Sunday. My father used to think most highly of him. Bothering his head about politics and bad trade has caused it all, and he always was fond of hearing himself talk."

While the hands were being paid a telegram came from Mr. Heathcote—

Just arrived at Dudley Station; coming direct to the works.

"I hope the women are not coming also," was Bryan's muttered comment. "What a bore poor old Heathcote is."

Even while he was grumbling to himself a taxi deposited Mr. Heathcote at the gates, and the workmen who were filing out cheered him heartily.

"My dear boy," he cried to Bryan. "This is far more terrible than I thought. The girls with me? No; I sent them home. Why, the offices are a wreck. Bless my life! I hope that the miscreants will be severely punished. I suppose that Starkey will have to stand his trial?"

He jumped from one subject to another, trotted through every room, and then on to the works.

When he was tired out, Bryan put Mr. Starkey's letter and documents before him, and his amazement left him wellnigh breathless.

"You must be a wizard, Endicott. Great goodness! Why, that man has been a thorn in my side for years. Slowly and surely he sapped my very life's blood; then you came upon the scene, and presto."

He chuckled, and mopped his shining bald head.

"And what are we to do with the old works?" he continued. "Can we bear the expense of rebuilding? The undertaking is enormous at my time of life."

"I shall run the old place on the old lines. We have many customers who prefer the old-fashioned make of goods. Well, I'm about tired out, and my head is somewhat painful."

He rose, and began locking the safes.

"I will go to Dudley with you, Heathcote, but I must be excused by the ladies until Sunday. I may drop in on Sunday."

"You *may*!" almost shouted Mr. Heathcote. "Is that the way you treat the woman who is soon to be your wife? Confound it, man, I can't believe that you care two straws for her."

Bryan laughed constrainedly.

"I'm not a lady's man," he explained. "My love is here amid the whirring wheels, the clanging of steel upon steel, the hissing steam, the roaring furnaces. I begin to feel that I have neither time nor inclination to fool about a woman's skirts, and I'm afraid that it will end miserably."

"You have discovered this too late," was the serious rejoinder. "Miss Lennox loves you with something like idolatry. You must do your duty by her, Endicott. You must get married, and the attractiveness of home will change your views."

"Perhaps."

They left the works and were driven off in the direction of Dudley.

At length Bryan said, after a short silence—

"Did I tell you about the heroism of Miss Bell, our new typist? We really owe our salvation to her."

"I saw some mention of it in the paper. We must increase her wages, Endicott."

"I was wondering what we could do in the way of adequate recognition. I seem to have paid little attention to the girl, for I can hardly recall her face to mind. I only remember a slim, pretty figure."

"Oh, a trinket of some kind, or a new dress, will satisfy her, no doubt. Girls nowadays will sell their souls for finery. Better leave it to Dolly to deal with."

"A capital suggestion, Heathcote. I will speak to Dolly about it to-morrow, and Vivien, too, might be interested in the affair. I have promised to call upon Miss Bell this evening to express my thanks."

The taxi pulled up at the Dudley Arms Hotel, and Bryan alighted.

"Sure you won't come to Brookdale with me?"

"No, I'm completely run down."

"Miss Lennox will be terribly disappointed."

"I can't help that," was the pettish rejoinder. "Good-bye until to-morrow, Heathcote."

Then, as the vehicle wheeled round, he called—

"Tell Miss Lennox to look for a letter from me in the morning."

He went straight to his room, and after a bath and a complete change of clothes felt a different man. Then he wrote to Vivien Lennox—

My Dear Vivien—I don't think that I am treating you kindly, but the bothers lately have knocked me out of time. I only wish that I were more worthy of your affection, and I begin to feel that I shall prove a big disappointment to you. But you will never accuse me of deception, will you? If you are still desirous of an early marriage I am ready, and Rozenby will sell Greystoke to us just as it stands. But we can settle this to-morrow. You will have heard from Mr. Heathcote that the old works have been handed over to me by Mr. Starkey, and under the circumstances I shall have to

postpone my trip to the States. Poor old Starkey! He still pretends to have something up his sleeve, but I think we can afford to be charitable to him.

Yours affectionately

BRYAN

After posting the letter he went to the dining-room, where he lingered for an hour or more. The men who knew him wanted to hear all about the strike at first hand.

"And what about the heroism of this girl typist of yours?" one said jokingly. "Worked up by the newspapers?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Then, by Jove, if she's young and pretty you ought to marry her, Endicott. That's the orthodox ending to such an episode."

"Your joke is in rather bad taste," said Bryan, coldly.

It was seven o'clock, and lighting a cigar he strolled into the corridor, remembering his promise to call on the Bells.

It was growing dark, but there were cheerful sounds in the streets. Busy feet, chattering voices, and snatches of song.

Bryan thought of some verses of a forgotten poet, and how true the words seemed—

> Our Saturday nights Heaven ordered,
> They come as a blessing rare;
> They fill up the tangled threads of toil,
> And lighten the heart of care."

He put on his hat, and went out.

"Marry Miss Bell," he thought grimly. "I can't think why that joke hurt me so, unless it is that I have too much marriage already in front of me. I have let sentiment go too far for once."

He glanced at the shop windows as he passed along, and they revived old memories. The bookseller was handing magazines and papers to his customers just

as he had done twenty years before. Then he had appeared to be a king among men, surrounded by his glorious books. Now he was old and wizened, and his stock-in-trade was of the tawdriest description.

There was a confectioner near by, and Bryan paused to look at a stout and florid lady behind the counter. At the age of eight he had believed this woman to be a perfect Venus. He went into the shop, and bought some chocolates for the mere sake of hearing the lady speak. Her voice was harsh, her dialect excruciating.

"And I am equally disappointed in the woman I have promised to marry," he reflected. "What idealists boys must be."

Arrived at the Masons' he knocked on the door. Mason himself opened it, and glanced at the box of chocolates rather curiously.

"Miss Bell is better, I hope, Mason?"

"Oh, yes, sir. She has been out to-day."

Bryan went upstairs, and Mrs. Bell admitted him into the sitting-room.

"I have kept my promise," he said, with a smile, "but Mason has already relieved my anxiety."

"My niece is much better sir," Mrs. Bell said, striving to appear calm, "but she has gone to bed, as she was rather tired. I am sorry."

Bryan rose at once.

"I am satisfied if I can see her at the works next week," he smiled. "Miss Bell will be interested to know that the damage amounts to very little, after all, thanks to her."

He left, and forgot all about the box of chocolates until he was back at his hotel.

"I suppose I left them on Miss Bell's table," he thought. "What an idiotic thing to do. I intended them for Vivien to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIV

"YOU SHALL LOVE ME!"

DICK TYLDESLEY cycled from Stourbridge to Dudley next morning so early that the Heathcotes had only just finished breakfast when he arrived.

"I've brought a couple of letters for Miss Lennox," he explained, but no letters were forthcoming when he and his cousin were alone together.

"You needn't look so transcendently happy, Vivien," he said sneeringly.

But Vivien laughed softly, for Bryan Endicott's letter was tucked away in the bosom of her dress, and its meaning was tingling through every fibre of her being.

"What do you want, Dick? Love of exercise has not brought you here, I know. Is it money?"

"You've hit it at once," he answered coarsely, "but it's a lump this time, for I've made up my mind to clear out."

Vivien frowned.

"Perhaps you will be a little more explicit, Dick."

"I always had the faculty of foreseeing danger, and I can see it now. Here, let's get into the fresh air; I'm stifling, and one never knows when old Heathcote will blunder in."

They left the room by the French window, and went into the garden.

"It seems as though the summer would never come to an end this year. We're nearly into October now, and the sun is as hot as June. Now, Vivien, I'm here

for solid business after a sleepless night. I'm going to give you advice, and if you don't like it, that's your look out."

Her lips tightened, and she glanced at his flushed and sullen face somewhat contemptuously.

"I'm listening, Cousin Dick."

"Don't cousin me. I met Mr. Starkey last night."

"Nothing remarkable in that, when one remembers that you live next door to each other."

"He's more dangerous than ever, and he's not the beaten man you fancy him to be. I have reviewed the situation a hundred times, and this is how it appears to me. You are here under false colours, enjoying the position and fortune of another girl, and Starkey and I have been parties to the fraud."

"I was the adopted daughter of the elder Mr. Lennox, and he intended that I should inherit everything," she said, with a note of harshness in her voice.

"But your adopted father never made a will; so you masqueraded as the daughter of Lennox."

"A California girl does not look down——"

"Let me finish, and then have your say. My mind is made up—solid. I'm going to quit. You think that Starkey daren't split for his own sake, but that man's too clever for me. Now, what I propose is this: let's lay our hands on all the money we can, and go back to California, or somewhere else you like. I know that you can beg, borrow, or steal a nice little sum, and I only ask for five thousand pounds. With this I can vanish, and take my mother with me."

He looked at her longingly.

"And if you'll come, too, Vivien, if you'll marry me, I'll never touch a card again—I'll never back a horse—I'll——"

She turned, and laughed in his face.

"In fact, you'll run a Sunday school, and give away tracts. Dick Tyldesley, you are a coward, and I despise you utterly. How dare you talk to me of marriage—you," she added, in biting tones. "I once agreed to marry Starkey because I considered him necessary to my future fortunes, though I always had a horror of him. I scoffed at love until I saw Bryan Endicott; now I would willingly renounce every penny that I have, and, if need be, follow him bare-footed through the world."

"King Cophetua and the beggar maid," he sneered.

"The simile is not a good one, Dick. Now let me tell you how I have mapped out my future. I shall marry Bryan Endicott at all hazards, and I will make him love me a little by the very force of my passion for him. I was brought up by the man who adopted me to the expectation of great wealth. Why should an accident of omission make me a criminal? Why should this baby-faced Miss Bell, the real Vivien Lennox though she may be, make a pauper of me just because my father neglected to make a will?"

"I like your reasoning."

"Miss Bell is the most dangerous element of all. She is here for a purpose, and that purpose is to marry Bryan Endicott, if she can. I know what these pretty, pussy-cat girls are. But she shan't, and I'm going to get her out of the way—for a time, at least. I may need your assistance, Dick, and I will pay you well for what you do. Oh, don't imagine that I'm utterly heartless. I'm working out a scheme to share my fortune with Miss Bell. Sum total, my dear boy, is—that I marry the man I love at all costs. I defy Starkey. I make use of you, and you shall have my orders later on. Now go, there's a good fellow."

Dick Tyldesley groaned.

"I'm bound hand and foot."

He stopped, for Mr. Heathcote was approaching them.

"So you are not gone, Tyldesley? That's all right. Perhaps you won't mind leaving a note at Endicott's hotel as you will have to pass it. I forgot to tell him that an American friend of ours is coming to lunch."

Dick Tyldesley accepted the commission, and shortly afterwards took his leave in no very pleasant frame of mind.

Endicott turned up at Heathcote's, and was introduced to the American.

"Pleased to see you. I never calculated to meet you here, sir."

"So you are the man who is revolutionizing the moss-covered notions of poor old Britain?" said the American. "I might have guessed that it was an American; yes, sir."

"But I'm not an American," smiled Bryan. "What on earth are you after?"

"Anything I can pick up. This is my third visit to the old country, and I met Mr. Heathcote a couple of years ago. I read about the riot, and thought that I would get into closer touch with you and this new machinery of yours. I've already had a look at the outside of your buildings, and I must say that you seem to be pretty well fixed. To-morrow I propose to see the inside of things, if you'll let me, and also get letters from you to certain people who may be of use to me. Say, that lady typist of yours ought to be permanently hitched on to the firm, if all accounts are correct. I saw her picture in one of the papers, and she looks real pretty, anyhow."

"We hope to improve the lady's position," observed Mr. Heathcote, "but I think the papers are making too much of the matter."

"Couldn't do that, anyway," said the American shortly.

After lunch he talked to Dorothy Heathcote, while his host enjoyed forty winks. Vivien and Endicott were in the conservatory.

"I shall be pleased to call upon Miss Bell," she was saying. "It is a duty that should not be neglected, Bryan. There is no possibility of the young lady being at the office to-morrow?"

"No; I gathered that she was still far from well, and told her aunt that she need not come to the office for a week, at least."

"Then I will call upon her to-morrow, Bryan. Will you give me carte blanche? Of course, if Dorothy Heathcote wishes to go with me, she can do so, but two cooks might spoil the broth. Dorothy is very nice and kind, but she is so tactless. As I was once poor myself I can sympathize with Miss Bell's feelings, and not wound her susceptibilities. Mr. Heathcote's suggestion of giving her a gold watch, or a necklace, is really too absurd; in fact, it is insulting. The dear old man means well, but he is a sad blunderer."

"I will leave everything to you, Vivien," Bryan said.

She was nestling her head on his shoulder, and gazing up at him with adoring eyes.

"And now, Bryan, my own Bryan, I should like to talk about ourselves. I have plenty of money, but I have no home; I have plenty of relations, but I have no friends; I have nothing that I care for in all the wide world but you, and I want to be always near to you, so that I may teach you to love me a little."

The last words were spoken tremulously—pathetically, and Bryan felt a tear fall on his hand.

"I am quite ready to make you my wife at once, Vivien. You are the only woman I ever cared for in the least. I am not half worthy of this great love of yours, but I will do my best to make you happy, and you have only got to say when it shall be. Naturally, I don't care how soon."

"Oh, my darling."

"But, Vivien——"

"I'm listening, dear."

"We must dispense with the usual tomfoolery of the honeymoon. I can't spare the time to go dodging about for two or three months, for I am testing a new electrical fan that supplies the blast to the cupolas."

"I only want to be by your side, even if it is one of the casting shops," smiled Vivien.

He laughed also, and continued—

"I can buy Rozenby's place right out in a week or so. He is anxious to sell. I think that Greystoke will make a charming home for us."

"You have made me very happy, Bryan; more than happy, and if love will make you happy, then you will be happy indeed. I will awaken it in your heart, if any woman can. You shall love me."

He kissed her, but his pulses were not quickened by a single heart beat.

"Kiss my lips, Bryan. Oh, you are so cold—so cold!"

She clung to him passionately, and he caressed her bright hair, saying—

"Dear little Vivien. I never dreamed what love was to a woman until now.

CHAPTER XXV

THE GENTLEMAN FROM AMERICA

BRYAN had no secrets from Dorothy Heathcote, and he often wondered why there was not more sympathy between her and Vivien; but he was content to account for this by the obvious dissimilarity in their characters. Then again, there was a considerable difference in their ages; and, moreover, Dorothy was one of those entirely amiable and even lovable women, who, nevertheless, take a great deal of knowing before you actually get into touch with them.

"Well," he said to her, when they were exchanging the confidences of old acquaintances later in the day, "Vivien and I have settled upon the momentous day at last, and I'm going to ask you to help her as far as you can, Dorothy. She really seems to have very few friends, and Mrs. Tyldesley cannot do much for her in her present state of health. I have bargained for a very quiet affair, and no honeymoon. Rozenby wants to sell Greystoke, so I shall buy it, settle down straight away, and go right ahead with the business."

"Business, business, always business, Bryan," she said, a little reproachfully. "I don't think I should like to be married in that way."

"That, my dear Dorothy, is only a little bit of feminine sentiment, which I really don't think Vivien would share. She thinks just as I do about it, and I honestly believe this sort of thing would please her best. By the way, she has been kind enough to take

Miss Bell off my hands, and see that she is properly rewarded for all that she has done for us. You see a woman can do that sort of thing ever so much better than a man, and so it's really quite a relief to me."

Dorothy was silent. Until now it had been understood that she and Vivien were to call upon Miss Bell together.

Vivien, meanwhile, was expressing the joy of her heart in somewhat extravagant fashion on the piano in the drawing-room. She played with a superficial brilliance, technically correct, but entirely soulless.

"How very like herself," thought Dorothy, as the chords came ringing through the open windows. Then she went on aloud—

"I have no doubt that she will be able to help you in that way. Miss Bell certainly deserves a great deal from the firm after the splendid way in which she behaved."

"And she will get it, you may be sure of that, Dorothy," he said. "As far as Endicott & Heathcote are concerned, that young lady may consider herself settled for life. By the way, what do you think of our American friend?"

"He seems very nice and interesting. I think all these travelling Americans are. He appears to be very much taken by those wonderful new works of yours."

"Yes," Bryan laughed, "a little too much so, if anything. I shall have to keep my eye on that gentleman. There are one or two things over yonder that he hasn't got to see. For one thing, I don't mind telling you that I've just completed a new smelting crucible that he'd very much like to have a specimen of. You see the difficulty for centuries has been the want of a vessel which will stand the heat without

bursting or perishing, and I flatter myself that I have got over that at last, and naturally I want the thing for ourselves."

Dorothy laughed.

"My dear Bryan, if you could only manage to get up as much interest as that over what is, after all, the most important matter in your whole life, I should have rather more hopes of your future happiness than I confess I have at present."

They were seated on the veranda, and Bryan, with Dorothy's permission, was soothing his nerves with a pipe, upon which Vivien had put her veto. He took it from his lips, and looked at her with a hard look in his eyes.

"I can hardly agree with you there," he said, in a tone which Vivien would not have cared to hear. "To a man like myself marriage is only an incident, and a rather commonplace one at that. I have made one fortune, and I'm going to make another, and so I suppose——"

He stopped, for a pained expression, almost of sadness, had come into Dorothy's eyes.

"You do not love Vivien," she said softly, "and I am very sorry for her, and for you, too, Bryan."

"I can't help it," he rejoined, in a low tone. "I admit that I am woefully disappointed, not with her but with what I have thought for so long was going to be the great passion of my life. I thought that young love of ours was going to last a lifetime, and now I come back to find that the fire has gone out."

"It is a great, great pity," she murmured, "and poor Vivien seems simply to worship you. Well, there may be some hope for you both in that. They say that love sometimes begets love. With all my heart I hope it will in your case."

"Thank you, Dorothy," he said, with a little shake in his voice, "that is just like your dear old self. My word! What a wife you will be to the man who is lucky enough to get you."

She got up, and went into the library without a word, and he, wondering somewhat, joined Vivien in the drawing-room. He spoke to her with a new tenderness in his tones when he took his leave, and the glad light which sprang into her eyes was at once a reward and a revelation to him.

"I shall have to be at the works pretty early in the morning," he said, "but I shall get finished all the sooner for that. If you like we'll drive over to Greystoke in the afternoon. We may as well get that matter settled at once. I know Rozenby wants to get out as soon as possible. He's just dying to get abroad again."

"I shall be delighted, dear," she said, putting up her lips for his kiss. "You may think it unmaidenly of me, but I do so long to be settled in that dear old place—with you. I shall be so happy, and Bryan, I will make you happy, too. I'm afraid I have not always been a very good girl, for I've dreamt of all sorts of vanities and foolishnesses, but this really seems like the beginning of a new life for me, and I'm going to try and deserve the happiness you are giving me."

Her voice shook, and as she looked up at him he saw that her eyes were swimming with tears.

"Don't be silly, Vivien," he said, smiling. "Of course you have always been good, ever since you were that dear little girl-sweetheart of mine. Yes, yes, we shall be happy enough, never fear." Then he hesitated and said, in a slightly changed voice—"There's really one thing I don't understand about you. Honour

bright, I cannot see how a girl like you could ever engage herself to marry an old ghoul of the Starkey type."

"That is just what I meant, Bryan, dear," she murmured, nestling closer into his arms. "That was my weakness and foolish vanity. I have been so miserably poor, and I think that getting all that money so suddenly must have turned my head. The man seemed to fascinate me in some way with a sense of power. I believed that my money, that hateful money, would be safe if he looked after it for me, and made more of it. I believed, too, that he would be a great man before long, and would make a position for me. It was all very bad, and mean, and wicked of me; but you see, dear, you had not come back then; you were only a dim memory, and I had almost forgotten what real love was like. And then you came, and I saw what I had done, the sin that I had committed against you and myself. You will never know the shame with which I have been punished, Bryan, but I have repented now."

It was impossible not to believe and pity her as she said this, with tears in her voice as well as in her eyes. He felt a more real tenderness for her than he had ever felt before, and kissed her softly shining hair.

"Forgive me, dearest," he whispered. "That is the last you shall ever hear from me on the subject."

Then came another little silence and another kiss—full on her lips this time, and then, taking his arms from about her nestling form, he said gently—

"I must be off now, Vivien. My American friend will be waiting for me all this time. I shall have him on my hands for a day or two now, and I shall have to look pretty smartly after him till I find out whether

he is to be trusted or not. You know how jealous I am of those mechanical offsprings of mine. Dorothy seems to think that I shall ride my hobby-horse to death before I have finished with it."

"I half wish the man had never come here at all," she said, petulantly, for she would have been only too glad to make the sweet leave-taking last a little longer. "Fancy, he actually accused me—me—of having an American accent. I wouldn't have taken such an impertinence from an Englishman, but these Yankees seem to think themselves privileged when they come over here."

Bryan laughed.

"Oh, you mustn't think anything of that. It was probably only his idea of a compliment. Well, good-bye again. I'll send Rozenby a wire when I get to town, and you may expect me to call for you not later than three. Meanwhile, don't forget how kind you're going to be to Miss Bell."

"You may be quite sure about that, Bryan," she said. "I am quite longing to make friends with such a brave girl, especially one who has been of such service to you."

Vivien went upstairs, and Endicott joined the American in the library.

"Now I'm ready, Mr. Chalmers," he said, as he shook hands with Dorothy and her father, and they left the house together.

"If I'd known how you were situated, Mr. Endicott, I'd have fixed myself up at the same hotel. Been more sociable." Then after a little silence he broke out—"Say, she's an almighty taking young lady, that daughter of your partner's."

"Miss Heathcote and I are very old friends," replied Bryan, somewhat stiffly. "With the possible

exception of the lady I'm going to marry, I know of no one for whom I have a greater respect."

"Sorry I spoke so shortly," said Mr. Chalmers. "I haven't got the hang of social things over here yet. But anyhow, you know, Mr. Endicott, I didn't want to say anything rude. Still, I suppose you're getting some of your old British reserve back. It's mighty queer that I never thought of associating you with the celebrated Frank Tynan, of Pittsburg; but now I'll take back all I said about stealing our ideas and machinery notions, for I guess you could give us more than a few if you wanted to."

"Possibly," replied Bryan, "but it happens we are wanting quite a few of them round here just now, and you're business man enough to know that we've got to keep them to ourselves."

Quite unconsciously Bryan dropped back for the moment into the old mode of expression. He was, however, rather surprised when the other looked up at him and said in quite a changed voice—

"See here, Mr. Endicott, suppose we understand each other. It's quite plain and only natural under the circumstances that you are suspecting me of wanting to get into some of your business secrets. I know you're watching me, and when that's so I feel just like thirty cents."

"I'm very sorry," began Bryan.

"No, you're not, sir; excuse me," replied Mr. Chalmers, calmly, "but I may as well set your mind at rest, and tell you that I have as much interest in your inventions, Mr. Endicott, as I have in balloon-flying. No, sir. I don't know a piston-rod from a crank-shaft, or a chunk of chilled steel from pig-iron. I've no more to do with the iron trade than I have with British politics. I spun that yarn to get in touch

with some members of it on this side, because I wanted some information for professional purposes."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, Mr. Chalmers," said Bryan, coldly.

"No, sir, but you will soon. I don't want to sail under false colours with you, Mr. Tynan—Endicott, I mean—though I'd like you to keep my confidence. The fact is, I'm a detective, on a special and pretty delicate mission. Of course, if you don't care about helping me, we can quit company right now. Anyhow, here's my card."

Bryan looked at it, and was considerably surprised to read the name of one of the most famous members of Pinkerton's staff.

"May I ask why you are confiding this to me, Mr. Chalmers?" he asked, looking him straight in the eyes.

"You'll learn all about that soon, Mr. Endicott. I'll explain matters over a cigar some time, if you'll just oblige me by believing for the present that there is nothing in my work that is hostile to you. Quite the contrary, in fact. And now will you tell me how long ago Miss Lennox quitted the States?"

"Miss Lennox has never been to America," replied Bryan shortly, wondering what on earth could have inspired such a question.

Mr. Chalmers whistled softly, and then said, seriously—

"That's mighty queer, Mr. Endicott, because I happen to have seen her out California way. Knew the old man, too. He was called the Coffee King one time of day, but he got cornered at last in a big deal. Tried to get up against a trust that was too big for him. Might have made millions, if he'd got through, but went under after he'd put up a mighty good fight

to the bears. Then he lighted out, and now I meet his girl here. Thought, mayhap, you might have got struck on her somewhere that way when you were in the States."

"I have already told you, Mr. Chalmers, that Miss Lennox has never been in the States," repeated Bryan, more stiffly. "I believe she had an uncle and some cousins out California way, and you have probably mistaken her for some of them."

"Oh, is that so?" said the American, quietly. "Well, the cutest of us get deceived sometimes, especially where there's a strong family likeness. Now, say, here we are at the hotel. What's the matter with a cocktail? I've been educating the bar-tender here, and he shapes quite well for an Englishman."

"Well, I can't say no to that," assented Endicott. "It's too much like the old times."

And with that he followed the American into the hotel.

CHAPTER XXVI

COUSINS

VIVIEN LENNOX had a difficult task before her, and she knew it ; but the issues at stake were so great that they gave her courage to carry it through. Indeed, when she had once made up her mind to face the real Vivien, the girl who had actually been Bryan Endicott's little sweetheart, she found herself welcoming the opportunity of deciding her fate in her own way.

" I wonder what she really means to do," she thought as she was driving into Tipton. " She must know that she is the real Vivien, and that therefore I cannot be. If she is playing a game, it must be a very deep one. She must know, too, that I have stolen her fortune, and yet she is here, masquerading as her old lover's typist. Why doesn't she say right out who she is, and bring the farce to an end at once ? "

She shivered as she thought of the possibilities of such a course.

" Well, I suppose I must leave the plan of attack to develop itself. There's one thing I do hope, and that is, that she isn't too nice. It would make everything so much harder."

She went to the bank first, and cashed a cheque for five hundred pounds. She knew enough of the world to recognize the fact that money is generally useful in an emergency, such as she might possibly have to face before very long.

As she was leaving the bank Mr. Starkey was passing

the entrance on his way up town. His presence seemed to strike her with a chill, but there was no possibility of avoiding him.

He raised his hat, and looked at her with the smile which she had learned to hate so keenly.

"Dear me, how curious," he said, softly. "Good morning, Miss Lennox. You were occupying all my thoughts just as you came into the street."

"I will not trifle with the truth by telling you that I am sorry I cannot return the compliment, Mr. Starkey," she replied, frigidly.

"Ah, yes, it's all very well for you to talk in that style now, Miss Lennox—now that you think yourself so very certain of winning your prize; but if you only knew all, I mean all that I could tell you, and all that I could do. Oh, Vivien, Vivien, I don't know even now whether I ought to hate or love you most. You have chosen the wrong road, b lieve me—a road that will lead nowhere but to disaster. And yet, one kind word from you, and I might forgive even Bryan Endicott. Cannot you say it, Vivien?"

"Will you be good enough to take the other side of the road, Mr. Starkey?" she said, very quietly, but with a glint of anger in her eyes. "If you don't, I must. You know perfectly well that if Mr. Endicott were not one of the best natured of men, you would be in prison by now."

"Before I go to the other side of the road, Miss Lennox," he replied, with a very ugly grin on his almost livid face, "I should like to remind you that a very few words from me would——"

"Oh, yes," she said, softly, "I know perfectly well what you are going to say; but, perhaps I can say it a little better for you. You, a lawyer of repute, some of it not very good repute, entangle an orphan girl

in a conspiracy to steal a fortune which belongs to another girl of the same name, to impersonate her, in fact, and you frighten her into becoming engaged to you, to promise really to share the stolen fortune with you. How would it be with you if I were to speak? What if I told how George Lennox and his heirs were advertised for, and how I came to England with no evil thought in my mind, and how you did the rest of the swindle? No, no, Mr. Starkey, we are both playing for pretty high stakes. You have lost, so far; I am winning; but don't threaten too much or you may wear out my patience. You have a good deal more to lose than I have, after all. Remember that, please—and now, if you don't leave me, I shall call a policeman, and give you in charge for annoying me in the public street."

Every word of the last two sentences hit him with a sting like that of a whip-lash. For once he had not a word to say. He stopped as though someone had struck him across the face, and Vivien went on to where her taxi was waiting at the corner of the road.

While she was driving back to Dudley the reaction came heavily upon her. Her right hand was clasped close to her throbbing heart; her lips were almost bloodless, and her breath was coming and going in short, quick gasps. Her eyes were staring straight in front of her, but seeing nothing.

"Well," she said to herself after a while, "it almost seems as though I were going to do as that palmist told me I should. I was entering upon a perilous period of my life. It would be necessary for me to face my enemies with unflinching courage; I must crush them without scruple or mercy, or be crushed myself. But I will crush them—I will—I cannot lose Bryan now."

She dismissed the taxi at the end of Castle Street,

and walked to the Masons' house. As she put her hand on the bell she said to herself—

"And now, I suppose, begins the battle between the real Vivien—and the other one."

Mrs. Mason opened the door, and Vivien saw at once that the woman knew who she was.

"I have called to see Miss Bell," she said, walking into the little hall. "You need not trouble to take my name up. I am her cousin, Miss Lennox, and she expects me."

Mrs. Mason said, "Yes, miss," and stood aside. She went up to the first floor, and paused a moment before she tapped on the door of the sitting-room, wondering why Mrs. Mason, pretending to dust the banisters, was watching her so closely. Then she knocked, and a moment later the two Viviens, for the first time in their lives, stood face to face.

After just one moment's hesitation she went in through the half-opened door, and with a swift, impulsive motion, closed it behind her.

"You are Miss Bell, as you call yourself now—no, don't look so offended, please. I have come to confess and make peace with you, if you will allow me. You are not Miss Bell, the typist, as you are supposed to be at the works——"

"May I ask who you are, and what you mean by speaking to me in such an extraordinary way?"

The words were spoken with as little feeling or inflection as if they had come from a phonograph. The other Vivien recognized instantly that she had met her match. There was no hope for her now save in conciliation, and she held out both her hands, saying with a note of pleading in her voice—

"No, you are not Miss Bell at all; you are my cousin Vivien. I am the daughter of George Lennox,

your father's brother, and I am going to marry Bryan Endicott. He has asked me to come and see you, and tell you how much indebted the firm feels to you for all you did during the strike."

"Ah," thought the real Vivien, while she was speaking, "then he knows everything, and me, too; and that is why he left the miserable box of chocolates here. Thank goodness I haven't touched them."

Then she said, aloud—

"Very well, Miss Lennox, if I may take your word that you are my cousin, it was very kind of Mr. Endicott to ask you to come and see me, and kinder still of you to come. Anything that I was able to do I did merely as an act of duty. I happened to know certain things, and I acted on what I knew. I don't think there is anything more to say, is there?"

Her hands dropped to her sides. She looked at her visitor as though she expected her to end the interview.

"Ah," said the other Vivien, in a voice which had a touch of real penitence in it, "I see that you hate me, and God knows that you have only too much right to do so."

"But why should I hate you, Miss Lennox? This is the first time we have ever met, and it will probably be the last. Cousins we may be, as you say, but you must see that as the future wife of my employer your way through the world must be very different from mine. But if you really are a Vivien Lennox, and my cousin, you must know that you are not the same Vivien whom Mr. Endicott knew here as a girl. Have you told him that?"

The question was put in a hard, cold tone, and it struck Miss Lennox like a blow. Her face flamed and then paled.

"I don't see what right you have to ask such a question," she stammered. "I have told you that Mr. Endicott and I are to be married immediately. Is not that enough? We have every confidence in each other, and we could not permit any interference."

"You needn't have any fear of that, Miss Lennox," Vivien said bitterly; "of course you have not told him. You would have exposed yourself if you had done so, and you could not be expected to do that. Nor is it any business of mine—now. Bryan—I beg your pardon, Mr. Endicott—has accepted you as his old sweetheart of the boy-and-girl days, and has asked you to be his wife. He would not have done that if he had not loved you, so I should only be committing a needless cruelty if I allowed the truth to be known. The matter does not concern me, so you may consider yourself quite safe."

No one recognized more clearly than Bryan Endicott's affianced wife the utter havoc of her life which this pale, coldly speaking girl could make by just uttering half a dozen words. The scornfully spoken sentences relieved her from a great anxiety, but they also humiliated her to the dust. She was saved, but she was beaten, crushed by the sheer dignity and strength of the girl she had so grievously wronged.

All the good that was in her nature revolted at the thought of the despicable part she was playing.

"Vivien," she exclaimed, holding out her hands pleadingly towards her, "is there any hope that you can forgive me? Your words are very bitter, but they are true and just. Knowing all you do, you know that the fortune I am enjoying is yours by right, but I am ready to swear to you on my knees that when the lawyers told me I had inherited it I did not know of your existence, and I honestly believed that it was

mine—that I was the Vivien Lennox it had been left to. My father was dead, I was alone in the world, and bitterly poor. Can you not realize what it meant to me, such an escape from the horrors of poverty and loneliness away there in California? And then I met Bryan, and to my shame I confess that I did allow him to think that I was the Vivien of the old days. And then, Vivien, I came to love him, deeply and truly love him, as I do now, and oh, I can't give him up, just when I am going to be his wife. Can't you see how bitterly hard it would be for me, Vivien?"

"There is no question of your giving him up, Miss Lennox, as far as I can see. Certainly I have not suggested any such thing," said Vivien, as quietly and coldly as before.

"You are very hard and stern, but I deserve no kindness from you," replied the other, with something like a sob in her voice, "but there is one act of justice that you must let me do. My money is not mine; it is yours, and you shall have it. Bryan asked me to come here to-day to see what reward you would accept for saving his works; but it is not that I have come to offer, it is your own money, which ought never to have been mine at all."

"I am quite ready to give you every credit for wishing to do what you think to be right, Miss Lennox," said Vivien, more kindly than she had yet spoken, "but surely a moment's thought will show you that it is out of the question."

"What do you mean, Vivien? The money is yours, and I am only too eager to give it back to you. Why should you not accept it?"

"One reason is that I am quite content as I am; and the other is that if you gave it up, Mr. Endicott and everybody else would know that you are not what

you have represented yourself. No, Miss Lennox, it may not be either law or justice, but you must keep the money. Remember that Bryan Endicott loves you and is going to marry you. It's too late to undeceive him now."

For a few moments Miss Lennox looked blankly at Vivien, and she began to realize that there was a greater love than she had ever dreamed of—that here was a girl who loved a man with such absolutely pure devotion that she was willing not only to sacrifice her own love and hopes of happiness, but also to give up a fortune which would have given her luxury instead of a life of labour, rather than allow him to discover that the girl he loved, and was about to marry, had deceived him.

"Vivien," she said at length, in a voice which trembled with real emotion, "what am I to say to you? You have raised yourself so far above me; you have shown me how mean a thing I am in comparison with you—I am not fit to marry the man who has won such love as yours. If I go away and never see him again, will you promise to take half of George Lennox's fortune, and forgive me for what I have done? Then, no doubt, you will come together again, and——"

"Miss Lennox," Vivien replied, in a cold, rather strained voice, "these are merely heroics. You have heard my decision, and it is irrevocable. Nothing would ever induce me to touch a shilling of that money, whether it is rightfully mine or not, at the price of ruining Bryan Endicott's life. Whether I love him or not does not matter. He loves you, and therefore cannot love me. The matter is perfectly plain, and I think that this interview, which must be painful to both of us, has lasted quite long enough. Good morning."

As she spoke she went to the door and opened it. There was no possibility of mistaking either the motion or her attitude. Miss Lennox held out her hand, and said beseechingly—

"You are right to send me away, Vivien. I am not fit to breathe the same air with you, but at least give me your hand for once, and tell me that you will try to forgive me for all the cruel wrong that I have done you."

But Vivien's marvellous patience and self-control were fast reaching the limits of endurance. The terrible tension of her nerves was relaxing; her limbs were beginning to tremble; and her breath was coming so fast that she knew she must soon sob outright.

She drew herself up, put her right hand behind her, and replied, in a tone which Miss Lennox never forgot—

"I have neither forgiveness nor friendship to give you. I know that I have made a sacrifice, but it was not for you. You have deceived the man I have loved all my life. You have robbed me of a fortune. You are a liar and a thief. Here is the door. Go, and be happy with the man you have swindled—if you can!"

And the other Vivien Lennox, her eyes dim with tears of rage and humiliation, and her face burning with shame, bowed her head and left the room without a word.

As soon as Vivien heard the front door close she went to her bedroom and flung herself on the bed, her whole body shaking with sobs, and wave after wave of long-restrained passion and hopeless regret surging through her sorely-aching brain.

CHAPTER XXVII

LORD ROZENBY SAYS GOOD-BYE

BRYAN had recently bought a fast-trotting horse and a smart little trap to carry him to and from the works. He was a passionate lover of horses and dogs, and would only use a motor car when distance or speed required it.

He drove up to Heathcote's door promptly at four o'clock, and was pleased to find Vivien already dressed and waiting. He gaily waved his hand to Dorothy Heathcote, who came to the door to see them off.

"Your father will not be home till six," he called. "He has something to do at Tipton—I did not ask him what."

Bryan assisted Vivien into the trap, took up the reins, and the spirited animal curveted mischievously for a few moments, then bounded away with swift, swinging strides.

Bryan looked at Vivien. Her eyes were sparkling, and her face was alight with animation.

"You are not afraid?" he said, smiling.

"Oh, no; I've been used to horses all my life."

"You mean since you had that money?"

"Yes, of course," she stammered, biting her lips. "Hired ones at that. There's a foolish speech for you. I should have said that I have often used a motor car——"

"I have never been bitten by the craze for a car. I prefer a horse, as there is nothing companionable

in a car. I believe that the mildest mannered man becomes an irresponsible lunatic when he can fly along in a motor car at fifty or sixty miles an hour."

Nothing more was said until they were beyond the town of Dudley, then Bryan continued—

"Rozenby is ready to conclude business, and will sell everything—lock, stock, and barrel. Greystoke is a charming place, and there is no finer country anywhere than around Hagley. We picnicked in the woods more than once when we were children, Vivien. You haven't forgotten?"

"Of course not, silly boy."

There was a reminiscent light in his eyes as he watched the horse's dancing mane.

"You talk so little of the past," he went on, "and I haven't heard you speak of your father, who worshipped the very ground you walked on."

"Don't," she pleaded. "This is no time to arouse painful memories."

"Painful! Those were my happiest days."

"Aren't you happy now, Bryan?"

"I don't know that I am—or it is a very different kind of happiness. Then I believed that nearly all men were noble, and that all women were angels. The golden future to me was fairyland unexplored."

"But you have been successful, Bryan. You are rich and famous, and the world is at your feet."

His lips curled contemptuously.

"I have no wish for the sordid adulation of men. I have climbed pretty far up, but if I were to fall there would be no helping hand for me."

"And do you think that women are selfish, too?" she asked, her heart seeming to surge up into her throat.

"I hope not. If I lost my faith in woman there would be nothing left."

She shivered, as though struck by an ice-cold blast.

"I suppose that we women are like men, Bryan; there are good and bad among us. Whatever I may be, I love you with a love that can know no change."

"I am sure of it," he said simply. Then he added, suddenly—"You called upon Miss Bell this morning?"

"I did, Bryan, but I have not referred to it, because I'm afraid that you'll be disappointed. My mission was not exactly a success. Miss Bell chose to be offended by the mere mention of her devotion to your interests. She was angry about the things in the newspapers, and said that she was ashamed to go out in daylight. I suggested a short holiday, but she interrupted me with the reply that she was going away altogether."

Bryan was dismayed. He knitted his brows, and exclaimed—

"How stupid! I will not lose sight of Miss Bell. I can never repay her for what she has done for us. I ought to have seen her myself. I can understand how aggrieved she must feel at my seeming indifference and ingratitude."

He looked annoyed and angry with himself.

"I feel about it very much as you do," said Vivien. "I went prepared to meet an ordinary typewriting girl of the better class, but Miss Bell has moved in circles equal to our own—I am sure of it. I wonder that you have not discovered this for yourslf."

"I'm not always very observant, especially of women," he confessed. "I don't think that I should know Miss Bell if I met her out of the office. I will make amends to-morrow."

When within two miles of Greystoke they saw Lord Rozenby advancing to meet them, mounted upon a

handsome chestnut horse. He waved one hand gaily, and wheeled round.

"A fine animal," observed Endicott, after greetings had passed, as he examined the chestnut critically.

"Yes, a bit too big for me. He will suit you down to the ground, Endicott." He patted the glossy neck. "Not a particle of vice, fast, and a good stayer."

"You wish to sell your horses, too, then?" asked Bryan.

"Everything, old man. I'm in for a globe-trotting spell, and shall finally make my home in India. A rich man can enjoy life over there. After we have had some tea we will go into figures. I called in an independent valuer, and I am not going to quibble over a few hundreds."

The two men strolled on to a veranda, unconscious of the fact that they were under the open window of the room where Vivien had been taken to remove her outdoor attire.

"I should not bother my head with any details, Rozenby," Bryan was saying. "Let your man of business transact everything with mine, and endeavour to rush it through. You are as anxious as I am to get it over and done with."

"Yes," Rozenby answered, with a sigh. "I shall get out of England, and never come back again. It has never been my home, you see, and I think that I hate it now. You will be married soon?"

"Within a month—no fuss, no bother. Perhaps——"

"Don't ask me to be there. You know why."

There was a short silence.

"I hope you will be happy, Endicott."

"Thanks."

"Great heavens, man, how can you be so indifferent?" exclaimed Rozenby. "I shouldn't care if —if——"

"If you weren't madly in love with my future wife, eh? What folly it is, Rozenby."

"Your indifference tortures me, that's all. Miss Lennox is throwing her life away."

He paced to and fro for a minute, Bryan regarding him half regretfully.

"Miss Lennox is quite satisfied. The subject had better drop, don't you think?"

During the tea conversation flagged. Vivien had overheard the talk between Endicott and Rozenby, and felt ill at ease. If Bryan would only show half the passion of this man.

Lord Rozenby took his visitors through some of the most important portions of the house, and Bryan pointed out certain things that he would not care to retain.

"You surely don't want to sell the family portraits," Bryan said.

"They are no use to me, Endicott," was the reply "Cousins, uncles, and so forth, ten times removed."

"I can't have ancestors ready made," laughed Bryan. "Strike out the portraits. I have a few of my own people to go on with."

The inspection over, Bryan looked at his watch, and suggested that it was time to leave, as they had an hour's drive before them.

When the trap was brought to the door, Lord Rozenby pressed Vivien's hand with a warm, lingering clasp.

"It is not likely that we shall meet again, Miss Lennox," he said. "You have my sincerest wishes for your future happiness, and if you should ever need a friend——"

"Come, Vivien," interrupted Bryan, "the horse is getting restive. Good night, Rozenby."

And they were soon flying homeward through the moonlit lanes.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WESTWARD HO!

VIVIEN lay for half an hour after her first paroxysm had passed, thinking the situation over, and trying to make some plans for the future. She felt bitterly humiliated by the knowledge that Bryan had offered her money in return for an act of devotion which had been done for love of him. She did not stop to reflect that in his eyes she was simply an employee of the firm, who had rendered a signal service, certainly deserving of reward.

Just now he was Bryan Endicott, her boy-lover, and no one else. And he had sent the girl who had robbed her of her fortune, and perhaps of his love, to make the degrading offer. Well, it was over now, and she must make the best of it. She got up and bathed her eyes, returning to the sitting-room with her resolve already fixed in her mind.

Her aunt came in a few minutes later, and she greeted her as usual.

"It is a lovely morning," said Mrs. Bell. "I have done my shopping. You ought to have gone with me, darling."

"I'm glad I didn't."

Mrs. Bell looked up quickly.

"You have been crying, Vivien."

She put her arms round the girl's shoulder, and kissed her cheek.

"Poor darling; your nerves are completely unstrung."

"Don't, auntie—don't. I am the most miserable creature in the world."

The tears were coming again, but she dashed them away.

"I have had a visitor—I am ashamed; I am humiliated beyond endurance."

Mrs. Bell stammered something, then waited, not knowing what to say.

"Miss Lennox, my cousin, has been here," Vivien went on. "Bryan Endicott sent her. She knew me. Bryan knows me, I believe, so you see how low I have fallen. She offered me her money, her pity, and—I hate her. Auntie, I must go away at once. I will not stay here; I will not stay in England."

"When you are calmer we will both talk it over, dear," Mrs. Bell said gently.

"I shall never be calmer until hundreds of miles are between me and them. I can earn money abroad; there is an opening for women as well as for men. Stenographers and typists are always wanted, and there I can learn to forget."

Mrs. Bell offered no word of consolation. The blow had fallen like a bolt from the blue sky, just when hopes had seemed fairest, and she was bewildered.

She was not a woman of strong individuality, or Vivien's caprice would never have been humoured, and the girl remembered it now.

"You warned me of my folly, auntie, and I have only myself to blame."

She left her seat, and began gathering together her small belongings—books, ornaments, and photographs. She was quite resolved to leave Dudley and its hateful surroundings that very day.

"But, my child," Mrs. Bell remonstrated, "where

are we to go, and what are we to do? Would it not be wiser to stay here quietly, and——"

"No, no, I could not endure it. You do not understand how I have loved Bryan Endicott all these years—how I have always felt that he belonged to me. I have felt happy in being near him, and I have pictured his surprise and pleasure when he came to know that his typist was really his sweetheart of long ago. And while I have been indulging in these silly dreams, he has been pitying me, and wondering what he could do to help me. Then he sent Miss Lennox to me with offers of money. I have thought it all out, auntie. I am going back to Birmingham to-day, and within a week I shall leave for one of the big American cities. If you go with me, your annuity can be paid through a bank in any civilized place in the world."

"If I go with you, darling! I believe that the voyage will do my chest good. The doctor has always recommended it."

"I shall sell my typewriter, and other things that I can't take with me," Vivien went on, "and I shall soon get work to do."

Vivien went downstairs in the afternoon to break the news to Mrs. Mason.

"We are going away for a time," she said, "and I want to pay you in lieu of notice."

"Oh, Miss Bell, you've taken the breath out of me. But you are not at all well, and I suppose Mr. Endicott wants you to have a long holiday. He's a gentleman, miss, and so kind. He forgave my Tom all his folly, but I hope he won't have Mr. Lumsden back again. That man would tempt an angel."

Vivien said nothing, but paid what was due, and

half an hour later a fly took the girl and her aunt, with their luggage, to the railway station.

They went to Birmingham, and to the Queen's Hotel.

"It will be cheaper than apartments for a week, when the expense of moving the luggage to and fro is taken into consideration," Vivien said. "And one has more freedom in an hotel. We shall not be under the prying eyes of a landlady."

The next day business was begun in earnest, and by the following Saturday they were ready to sail for New York. Mrs. Bell left all the arrangements to her niece, and was already enjoying the voyage in prospect.

Monday morning found them *en route* for Liverpool, and on the next Wednesday they watched the shores of England fade from view, from the deck of a White Star liner.

The ship was crowded with passengers, a great percentage of whom were well-to-do Americans returning home, and Vivien was struck by the prevailing good humour.

There were good times in the dining saloon, pleasing banter, and infectious laughter, and the two English ladies made several friends. One gentleman, with a heavy white moustache, and sun-tanned face, was particularly kind to Mrs. Bell. He was known as Captain Colain, and in appearance was a typical American seaman of the old school—at times stern and taciturn, at others brimming over with good humour and quaint anecdotes.

"My wife is a bad sailor," he said one morning to Mrs. Bell, "and I can't induce her to come on deck. We take a trip to England every summer, and every time she vows she will never do it again. Are you going out to see friends on our side?"

"No," Mrs. Bell answered. "My niece and I are practically alone in the world, and we are going to New York, possibly to stay."

"H'm!" He glanced at the ladies swiftly from under his heavy white brows.

"And you have no friends—no letter of introduction—nothing?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Bell.

"Then you had better allow me to help you. I may be able to put you on the safe track. New York is a sink for the refuse of Europe, and, to be safe, a respectable stranger has to be something more than discreet."

He waited, rather amused by the hesitation shown by Mrs. Bell.

"Are you afraid of me? You English are so terribly exclusive. You never say much about yourselves." He laughed. "Here is my card. Ask the captain of the boat what you like about me. We have known each other for thirty years. I am an old sailor myself, but now I run a packing-case factory in New York."

Vivien had moved a few steps away, and her aunt looked distressed.

"I don't like bothering people with our troubles," she said. "But you are very kind, Captain Colain."

"It's no bother. I've helped dozens of people, and been helped myself many a time. If I can help you, tell me your position."

Mrs. Bell hesitated no longer.

"I have a small annuity," she said, "and my niece has earned money as a stenographer, a typist, and as a teacher of music and painting. She is very clever. We are leaving England because she wishes it. I can

give you the name of our lawyer in Birmingham. My husband was an officer in the British army."

"Now we are getting to know one another," Captain Colain said heartily. His keen eyes were turned upon Vivien's face. "A love affair, eh? I hope we shan't have the young fellow after us in too much of a hurry. I know the symptoms—I've got three daughters at home. I'm going to do what I can for you, but it's my belief that you won't be in New York very long. In the first place, I'll see you safe at a respectable hotel. Then you can amuse yourselves, seeing the sights. It is just possible that I may be able to find a place for Miss Bell in my office—that is, if she's up to her work. Miss Bell," he called, "just step this way, and I'll tell you what we have been discussing. It seems to me that we're going to be pretty good friends before long."

CHAPTER XXIX

NEWS FROM HOME

It was not often that Captain Colain was in doubt about anything connected with his own affairs. He usually made up his mind to say yes or no right off, and there was an end of the matter; but when the liner was nearing Sandy Hook he was debating with himself whether he should invite Mrs. Bell and her niece to go with him and his wife to their home at Mount Vernon, or take them to a quiet middle-class hotel in New York.

He spoke to his wife upon the matter, but that lady was too lackadaisical to have an opinion of her own. One of the hardships of life since her husband had retired from active service had been the drawback of having a home to look after. She preferred living in an hotel, where there was nothing for her to do, except lounge about in pretty frocks, or gossip on the veranda.

"They are real nice people, and I should like to have them home for a while, if you think of asking them."

That was all Mrs. Colain said, and the captain did not ask them. He told himself that they would not accept if he did, and that it might not be wise until he was sure of their *bona fides*.

He finally took them to an hotel on Broadway, from the windows of which they had an uninterrupted view of the City Hall buildings.

"This is clean, and moderately cheap," Captain Colain said. "It also advertises that it is run on the European plan; but that's only a draw, for which the proprietor may be forgiven." He laughed loudly. "Coming to business, that must remain in abeyance for a few days, and in the meantime you will find plenty of amusement in New York City. Our Indian summer is just at its best, and you will learn for the first time what sweet air and blue skies are like."

His next action was to put an inquiry through one of Pinkerton's agencies concerning them. It was only reasonable that he should satisfy himself as to the truth of Mrs. Bell's statements.

"Put it through by cable to Mrs. Bell's lawyer," he said to the manager, "and tell them to hurry up with a report. I want to fix up the young lady as my confidential stenographer, and I must feel that there is no chance of any of my private business getting into the hands of adventurers."

"Can't you find a stenographer in the City of New York, Captain?" asked the manager, dryly. "We're getting crowded out with foreigners. Say, one of our best men's in England at this very moment, and I guess we'll do this job direct. You know Seth Chalmers who ran the Paris swindlers down two years since? He's the man."

"Do it your own way," said Colain. "And do it well. I never grumble at your charges, and I guess I'm not taking any advice as to the way I run my show."

Two weeks passed, and a report to the following effect was received from Seth Chalmers—

Mrs. Bell and Miss Edith Bell, C.K. The elder lady has a Government annuity granted by Parliament for the dis-

tinguished services of her husband, who was killed on active service. Some disappointment, which I am at present investigating, decided them to leave England. Don't lose sight of them on any account, as I have a theory which may turn out a pretty big surprise. If it does, the firm won't suffer. Hope my inquiry about Lennox, the Coffee King, is through. Very urgent. Mail report follows.

The manager was interested, and gnawed at his grey moustache thoughtfully.

"The Lennox papers will be in your hands in a day or two at most, friend Chalmers," he muttered. "Now, how much of this report shall I lay before Colain? Um, the whole of it, and I guess he'd better let the stenographer lay off a bit."

A messenger was despatched to Captain Colain's office, and he read the information from England with mixed feelings.

"Good and bad," he reflected. "I don't see how I can take the girl into my employ until the mail report comes in. She's too attractive-looking for a stenographer, too gentle, too retiring. I'll run down town, and give the ladies a call. They must not be allowed to run out of money."

Mrs. Bell and her niece were just going out when the captain walked up the hotel steps.

"I was passing, so I thought that I would see if you were quite comfortable here."

He looked at Vivien, and smiled. "Too good-looking by half," was his mental decision; then he said, aloud—"Mrs. Colain wants you to pay us a visit. Our home is yours, until the fall business begins."

Mrs. Bell demurred, and glanced at her niece.

"You are very kind, sir," Vivien began, "but I would rather commence work. Besides, we should not care to trouble you just now."

"H'm!" said the captain, looking rather perplexed. "I have engaged you, Miss Bell, at a salary of fifteen dollars a week; but as the factory is undergoing some structural repairs I'm not ready to receive you, and the cashier has instructions to mail you a cheque weekly, commencing next Saturday."

"I don't wish to accept anything I have not earned, Captain Colain," Vivien said, decidedly.

"Foolish girl," was the testy rejoinder. "I can't have your time for nothing, and you place me under a very awkward obligation. But for my promise you would have been earning money before this. People who are willing to work don't stand idle in New York City. I'm not going to have you around my office, with it full of dust and dirt, just because you want to fill in time. Your notions are somewhat out of date, Miss Bell. I don't want you for two, maybe three weeks, but that cheque is coming along, all the same. Now, how have you been enjoying yourselves?" he added, changing the conversation.

"Splendidly," answered Mrs. Bell, with a touch of enthusiasm in her voice. "I've suffered for years with my chest, but this beautiful air and sunshine have already done me good."

"Yes, but you couldn't stand the winter here. Terrible! And the spring brings pneumonia, pleurisy, and la grippe. I always get out of it myself as much as possible. You've been to Central Park, I suppose?"

"That's where we spend most of the time," said Mrs. Bell. "We are going along River Drive this morning."

"I'll have to take you ladies in hand a bit next week. Mrs. Colain is coming to New York to buy some winter clothes, and we'll take a few trips in my automobile."

As Captain Colain spoke he picked up a copy of the "New York World" which lay on a small table near. Almost the first thing to attract his attention was the following:—

ROMANCE OF A BRITISH IRONMASTER
HE MADE HIS PILE IN AMERICA
NOW TO BE MARRIED TO HIS GIRL SWEETHEART AFTER A SEPARATION OF MANY YEARS

There was a column of small type, and portraits of the hero and heroine of the story. The clever writer had built up a fanciful yarn in true American fashion. A dozen lines of truth, and the rest nicely dressed lies. The hero was Bryan Endicott, otherwise Frank Tynan, the inventor. The heroine was Miss Vivien Lennox, and the couple were to be married in England on the day the newspaper was published—were, indeed, married by the time the romantic story was tickling the palate of a big section of the American public—if there had been no hitch in the arrangements.

Captain Colain was not particularly interested in the affair, and he rose to take his leave, saying—

"I must say good-bye. I'm wasting my own time, and spoiling your walk. Rather a pretty story this, if true." He pointed to the newspaper. "And being news from England may amuse you. I remember that Frank Tynan—or Bryan Endicott, as he's called here. He made a big stir with his inventions. It isn't often that a Britisher beats us on our own ground. But this young fellow's a dandy."

He shook hands with the ladies in a cordial way, and turned to go.

"I will write early next week and let you know when Mrs. Colain is coming."

The instant he was gone Vivien snatched up the newspaper, her lips trembling, her face deadly white. Yes, there was the story, but the headlines alone were enough to tell her that there was somewhere a horrible mistake.

Bryan Endicott marrying the daughter of his old schoolmaster—the girl who had been his sweetheart when a boy. It was false, utterly false.

"Oh, auntie, read this," she whispered. "It's dreadful—Bryan is marrying this woman because he thinks she is me—and I might have undeceived him, but now it's too late—too late!"

CHAPTER XXX

MR. CHALMERS GETS TO WORK

BRYAN was at the works in good time on the Monday following his drive with Miss Lennox to Greystoke. The men of law and the mortgagees were naturally anxious to get such a profitable piece of business as the transfer of Mr. Starkey's establishment to the now famous firm of Endicott & Heathcote completed with as little delay as possible, and he very soon found his hands full of business which was both strange and distasteful to him. Still, it had to be got through, and he tackled it with his usual energy and determination.

Contractors' men were here, there, and everywhere, spreading noise, dust, and general confusion about them, and his temper was by no means improved when Mr. Heathcote appeared, accompanied by the unexpected in the shape of Mr. Chalmers.

"Guess you've got into a pretty good old mix-up here, Mr. Endicott. Anyhow, I won't detain you very long. Just about ten minutes, if you can spare as much."

"Fifteen is the limit," he said shortly. "Numbers of people are waiting now. Come into my private office."

"I won't sit down," Chalmers said, when they were alone. "Did you tell your partner about me?"

"No, I have not seen him since you and I parted last night until now."

"Good. Don't say anything at present; I want to go through the works to have a look at the workers. Mr. Heathcote has been a square man to me, and so have you. Now, here's a bit of information for you. Your secrets are being sold, and you've got a fine penman around somewhere. I thought I would take a look at him. Like as not we've met before."

Bryan was incredulous at first.

"I think I will sit down then, so that I can whisper in your ear," said Seth Chalmers, with a self-satisfied nod. "Do you remember Baron Erback and a thousand tons of steel rails for Germany?"

"Only too well," Bryan answered quickly. "We lost the contract."

"Your quotation was cabled to an American firm; and there's somebody around these works pulling your leg."

"Thank you, Mr. Chalmers. You can have the run of the works, but I think that the bird has flown. His name was Lumsden, and he was our confidential man."

"Lumsden." The American whipped out his pocket-book. "And his address? Holly Lodge, Sedgley. Thank you. I guess I'll just walk around with Mr. Heathcote for a while, and then look up Mr. Lumsden. Good morning, sir."

Seth Chalmers scanned closely every face in the office, and having thoroughly satisfied himself that his man was not there he shook hands with Mr. Heathcote and went to Sedgley, a village some three miles away.

A few cautious inquiries revealed the fact that Mr. Lumsden was a fairly well-to-do man. He had been buying small property lately, and was highly respected in the neighbourhood.

The village innkeeper was Chalmers' informant, and he seemed to be proud to talk to the well-dressed, prosperous-looking stranger.

"I haven't seen Mr. Lumsden for years," the American said, "and I want to give him a little surprise. We are really connected by family ties. He appears to have made his fortune at home, while I have made mine in South Africa. What number did you say his house was?"

"No number, sir. Holly Lodge is the name of it; stands on top of the hill; a white house, with a big garden round it."

"Let me have a dozen of your best cigars," said Chalmers, throwing down a sovereign, "and have something with me." He looked critically along the quiet street. "Not much change in twenty years. I shall settle down here, if I can buy a suitable place near to Lumsden. Do you think he is likely to be at home now, or does he still go to business?"

"I can't say, exactly. I did hear that he had just resigned his post at Endicott & Heathcote's. He's been their best man for years."

"Yes, I know. I'll look Mr. Lumsden up now. See you again. So long."

He walked slowly up the hill and past Holly Lodge. It was a pretty little place.

"He must be my man," reflected Chalmers. "His penmanship gives him away. Strange that I should have run him almost to earth two years since, and then be at fault. Forging bank notes and letters of credit became too risky, I guess, and he has come down to selling the trade secrets of his employers. In a few years he has seemed to put up a nice little fortune out of three pounds ten shillings a week. Three pounds

ten is about the same as five pounds in America. The wages of a cabinet-maker!"

He went back to the village inn, and told the landlord that Mr. Lumsden wasn't at home.

"I suppose he drops in here sometimes?"

"Only in the evening, and by the side entrance. I've got a little parlour behind the bar for special customers." He stopped, for the parlour bell rang at the moment. "I wonder who that is?" He listened. "Blest if it ain't Mr. Lumsden himself, and he's got a stranger with him. I never knew such a thing to happen before."

Seth Chalmers' eyes brightened, and he looked pleased.

"What luck! Answer the bell, and don't say a word about me. Mr. Lumsden may have important business to do. I'll take my glass, and smoke in the garden, if I may."

The landlord assented, but Chalmers seemed to take a long time in doing things. He was not gone when the landlord came back from serving Mr. Lumsden.

"He's a bit upset. Somebody's robbed him of a lot of money. I thought there was something unusual for him to come here of a morning."

Chalmers took up his glass, and strolled along the passage that led to the back of the inn. He heard Lumsden speaking, and smiled. The tone was familiar to his trained ear. He stood near to the door of the parlour and heard Lumsden's voice say—

"I hope this is not an attempt to blackmail, Scott."

"Blackmail be hanged! I came to you, 'cause I've got no one else to go to. I want a few pounds to start fresh with, an' I've got that paper to sell."

"Pish! I wouldn't give you a shilling for it. I'm keeping clear of Mr. Endicott. I'd stake my life

it's another scheme of Starkey's, and he left it in your room purposely. It doesn't interest me, anyway, so take it away. What I want is to see the last of Starkey, and then I shall light out myself. He's used me, and paid me with a bad cheque. Now I'm going to be revenged."

"What is it you want?" asked Scott, after a pause. "Here, gi' me another drink out o' that bottle. I ain't particular what I do. My girl's chucked me, an' I'm as good as ruined, an' Starkey's done it. Nobody'll give me a job now. I'm Morty Scott, the Socialist. He, he! Straight, Lumsden, what'll you stand if I hit Starkey over the head, or shove him into the cut? Now, don't be mean, or I might serve you the same. You was the one to get me out of Heathcote's, remember."

Lumsden laughed uneasily.

"If you talk of murder I'm done with you. It's a bit too thick. Besides, you're drunk."

"You're a liar! Gi' me some money."

"Hush!"

Lumsden rose, and looked through the glass upper half of the door. Apparently satisfied that the landlord was well out of hearing, and at the same time near enough to be useful if required, he resumed his seat, saying—

"Starkey has ruined us both, and is laughing in his sleeve at us. Do what you like with him. Here's twenty pounds in gold; when you are through with that, I'll make it a hundred. I think I'll take those papers, Scott."

"I don't think you will, not much," Scott hiccupped, taking the money. "I won't hurt Endicott, 'cause he's kind to my girl. Don't you forget you owe me eighty pounds, an' if there's any hanky-panky,

down you go. Fill up my glass, you old scarecrow. You've fed me on this stuff till I'm getting to like it. Morty Scott, Socialist—that's what the papers call me. I'll be Morty Scott summat else afore long. I never thought of knocking daylight into Starkey's head until you put me up to it."

"Do be quiet," whispered Lumsden. "Better have a soda, and lie down a bit."

"Shan't have soda, and shan't lie down. I'm goin' to look for Starkey, an' when I've polished him off I'm coming back here for eighty pounds, an' don't you forget it."

He thumped the table with his big fist.

"Landlord, where the dickens are you? Bring me a drop o' brandy, an' hurry up. I'm Morty Scott, if you want to know anything about me. You can read my name in the papers, if you want to, an' if you don't want to, do the other thing."

The American tip-toed into the garden.

CHAPTER XXXI

MAGGIE'S LETTER

SETH CHALMERS kept his ears open, and his eyes, too.

"It's just my luck to stumble into business I'm not looking for. Now, there was the affair of the stolen necklace, a hundred thousand dollar job, and I tumbled on it while looking for a sneak thief. I came to Europe this trip to locate a gang of counterfeiters, and find this nest instead. There's the California girl, who has never been there, and Mr. Lumsden, the penman."

He chuckled in his throat, every sense alert. He heard the landlord refuse to supply Scott with more drink, and then Lumsden left the parlour and started homeward.

The detective thought it was time to return to the inn and talk pretty straight to the landlord.

"Your friend, Mr. Lumsden, has just gone," that worthy said.

Chalmers poked his head through the parlour doorway, and saw that Scott was dead to the world. He stepped into the room and stooped over the man, the landlord watching him suspiciously.

"He's left in my charge, and I'm going to leave him in here to sleep off the liquor. It's a risky thing for me to do, but he was drunk when he came."

"I'm sure of that," Chalmers said, quietly. "But don't you worry. I'll look after the man. He has

valuable papers about him and a pocket full of money. After a while I'll take him home."

"Not till I know who and what you are. I promised Mr. Lumsden that I would take care of him. I don't want to be rude to a customer, but you had better clear out of this room, to save trouble."

The landlord hitched up his sleeves, and his eyes snapped wickedly, while Seth Chalmers took a careful survey of him.

"You've been a boxing man in your time," he said, quietly.

"Middle-weight champion of the Midlands," was the grinning response.

"I thought so. Now, I'm going to talk straight to you, because I'm bound to take you into my confidence. I'm a detective, and I'm going to pay you to hold your tongue. Lumsden is a rascal whom I have been trailing for years. He has already served two terms in America for forgery."

The landlord listened, his eyes bulging.

"Have you any idea what passed between Lumsden and this drunken fool?"

"No."

"Lumsden has been inciting him to murder somebody named Starkey."

"Good Lord!"

The innkeeper mopped his forehead.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Hold your tongue regarding myself, and I'll see that a ten-pound note finds its way into your pocket."

"I'm dumb. Now what about this chap? Lumsden's coming back in an hour."

"I'll step into the chemist's and get a draught that will sober him, and you must tell Lumsden that

he recovered and went home. I shall go with him, though."

Within fifteen minutes Scott was on his feet, dazed and foolish. He glared at Seth Chalmers, and an oath passed his lips.

"Somebody's been through my pockets. I had some papers for Mr. Endicott——"

"Here they are," interrupted Chalmers, "and the twenty pounds paid to you by Lumsden."

"Twenty what?" sneered Scott. "Gi' me my papers. I wouldn't touch Lumsden's dirty money. My gracious! how my head reels. Mr. Endicott wouldn't do anything for me, and I was going to be revenged on him, but I won't, because he was kind to my girl."

He sat down, and clasped his head between his hands, groaning.

"Never again—never again!" he said. "Drink means red ruin for me. I remember about Lumsden now, and the papers. I was hard up, and wanted a bit of money. Now, guv'nor, where do you come in? You're taking a mighty high hand."

"I am an officer of the law."

"Oh!"

Scott looked at his wrists, and shivered.

"Are you going to put the darbies on?"

"I'm your friend, Scott, and I'm working for Mr. Endicott. Now I'll see you safely home, and we'll talk over matters on the way. For the present I'll take possession of the document, which is a report from the American police concerning the antecedents of Miss Lennox. It's a very interesting document, as you know, but you shall have the full benefit of it when the time comes."

Scott did not do much talking on the way home.

He was too ill and depressed. He had been drinking steadily for several days without eating a single meal of solid food, and the result was a general breakdown.

"Yon's my cot," he said, at last, "an' my poor old mother standing in the doorway. I'm ashamed to meet her. I know I'm killing her with grief."

Mrs. Scott stared hard at the stranger; then she began to cry bitterly.

"Where have you been for two nights?" she said, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron. "Maggie's been sleeping here with me, I was so frightened."

"Maggie!"

"Yes, and there's a letter for ye from her on the corner of the mantelpiece."

"Mother, I'm turnin' over a new leaf from this day. You know I always keep my word. We'll have a bit of money in the bank again before long. This gentleman's goin' to help me. I've been in the wrong boat ever since I took to spoutin' about what I didn't understand."

"And I won't have to leave the old cottage, Morty?" his mother asked, hopefully. "I came here a bride over thirty years ago. Your father died here, an' I want to die here, too, when my time comes."

"Don't make it harder for me, mother," her son said. "I'm another man when this day's over. I'll buy the cot for you. I had enough money once, and I'll have it again. I do feel bad, and no mistake. If you don't mind leaving our bit of business till to-morrow, mister," he added, turning to Seth Chalmers, "I'd be much obliged. You see, I ain't in a fit state to talk sensibly. A man can't throw drink off in an hour. But afore you go you might let me know the exact drift of the dockyment Starkey

dropped in my room. I read it to mean that Mr. Endicott was going to marry a woman who ain't got no right to call herself Miss Lennox. I took it to Mr. Endicott all right, but he hustled me out of his office. I'll allow I wasn't as sober as I might have been. Then I got riled an' thought I'd get even with him by sayin' nothing till he was married. I don't exactly know what's been going on since, only that I've been a fool all along the line."

The detective laid twenty pounds on the table.

"This," he said, "is money given to you by Mr. Lumsden to do for Starkey. I don't say that Starkey does not deserve it, but——"

"Don't, mister. Let me send the money back."

"No, not until I give you instructions. In the meantime I'll take care of it."

He turned suddenly, for the window was momentarily darkened, then darted to the door and looked down the street. Mortimer Scott's face was buried in his hands, and Mrs. Scott was at the back.

"What kind of man is this Starkey?" asked Chalmers, quietly. "I mean, what does he look like?"

"A short man, but not a little 'un. He's got a big head, an' shoulders like an ox."

"Thanks. If he should come here——"

"He won't."

"I'm not so sure of that. He may remember where he left his pocket-book, and wish to make terms with you. Avoid him—say you are ill—anything. If he should force himself upon you, and ask about me, say that I am a master from Sheffield, whom you have asked for work. I shall have a lot for you to do, Scott, and will leave you five pounds on account of wages. That will do for the present, and I may be along here to-morrow."

"I'm much obliged to you, mister," Scott said, gratefully. "I ain't getting my just deserts by a long shot, but I'll do anything you want me to do. I'm going to work now for my poor old mother and Maggie Cornforth."

He remembered the letter on the corner of the mantelpiece, and reached for it with a shaking hand. Before opening it he pressed his lips to the writing on the envelope, then read:

DEAREST MORT—I have been reproaching myself every minute since we parted outside the works. I said some unkind things, and I'm sorry for it. I suppose that you are away looking for work, but you ought to have let your mother know. She came to our house very late the other night in a sad way about you, and against the wishes of my father I have been staying all night with her. I want to tell you that I have good news for you. Mr. Endicott did not mean all he said—none of us do when we are angry and silly.

If you will only make a new start there is a splendid future before us. I say "us," because I shall never desert my old sweetheart, and I've told my people so. I shouldn't be any good to you if I wasn't prepared to stand by you in storm as well as in sunshine.

Your faithful sweetheart

MAGGIE

There were tears in Scott's eyes when he finished reading the letter.

"What a beast I am," he groaned. "I ought to be hung right off. But the women are always a chap's salvation. Just read that, mister, and say if I'm worth it. It's the first time a third party ever see one o' my love letters, but I ain't ashamed of 'em."

Seth Chalmers humoured the man.

"This girl of yours is a jewel," he said. "Give me your hand, Scott; I've got absolute faith in you now."

CHAPTER XXXII

GONE!

THE news that Tom Mason brought to the works next morning was most distressing to Bryan Endicott. Miss Bell and her aunt were gone.

"They seemed to make up their minds all at once, so my wife says, after Miss Lennox had been."

"I dare say I shall hear from Miss Bell," Bryan said. "She may have merely gone away for a month's holiday, as I suggested. She did not mention where she was going?"

"No, sir, not a word. I asked the flyman who took the luggage to the station, and he said that the ladies took tickets to Birmingham."

"Don't turn amateur detective, Mason," Endicott said, in tones of reproof. "Miss Bell is at liberty to go where she pleases."

Nevertheless, he was glad to know where she had gone. He felt convinced that there was a serious misunderstanding somewhere. He questioned Miss Cornforth and Marsh. Neither had had a letter from Miss Bell, and both sincerely regretted her departure.

"We were such good friends, and she was so chummy," Maggie Cornforth said to Marsh. "But I always felt that she was a long way above her position. It's easy to tell a lady when you see one. I mean the real thing."

"You're right," answered Marsh gloomily. "I was awfully in love with Miss Bell."

"You! You're only a boy. You were in love with me at one time."

"So was Lumsden," retorted Marsh. "And you made me swear never to tell Mort Scott. I wish that I had now. He'd have crumpled Lumsden up, and saved a lot of trouble. How is Mort getting on?"

Maggie's face flushed warmly, and her blue eyes sparkled.

"He's going to sign the pledge this week. I saw him last night."

Marsh whistled.

"I thought that he'd stepped it or got locked up. He certainly has been doing the baby-act. No chance for me now, I suppose?"

Marsh dodged a ready reckoner, and went on seriously—

"I'm glad about Mort. He used to be all right until Mr. Starkey got hold of him. That's bad news about Miss Bell, though. I never saw anybody so nice looking as she was, and nicely spoken, too. No side like the common girls we generally get here. No offence, Miss Cornforth. Hello! there goes the governor's bell."

Marsh hastened to obey the summons, and when he entered the private office Endicott motioned to him to shut the door.

"Marsh, I have a note here that I want you to take to Dudley, and I trust you to keep your tongue well behind your teeth, because it is to a detective whom I wish to follow Miss Bell. I cannot allow the young lady to efface herself in this way, and I cannot understand why she should wish to do it. I'm afraid that she considers herself to have been badly treated, and we must find her at any cost."

"Yes, sir."

"Mason says that she and her aunt went to Birmingham by train, and that is all we know about the matter. You can tell the detective no more on that head. Unfortunately, I cannot give a description of her appearance accurately, so I leave this to you."

"I can do it, Mr. Endicott. Her face is beautiful, and I wonder that you never noticed it. Her eyes are the colour of pansies, and her hair flashed like finely spun gold in the sunshine."

He flushed slightly, for his master was staring at him amazed.

"Excuse me, sir, but I go in for poetry out of office hours."

Endicott laughed.

"By Jove, Marsh, you're an all-round genius. You deepen my interest in Miss Bell."

"And she's a high-born lady, too, sir. You can't mistake them. They are always civil to those beneath them—no airs, no nonsense. I wish you would let me find her, sir."

But Endicott shook his head.

"I don't think that I can spare you from the office, Marsh. Besides, there must be no mistakes in this matter. You can go now, and don't leave Dudley until you have put this letter into Mr. Seth Chalmers' hands."

"Certainly not, sir."

Marsh thought it no breach of confidence to tell Miss Cornforth that "the guv'nor's going to find Miss Bell. He's more interested in her than he is in his coming marriage."

"I shouldn't like such a hole-and-corner wedding," Maggie said, tossing her head.

"Real swells never care for show. It's only your jumped-up snobs and them genteels that want a row

of carriages, a church full of admirers, and a shouting crowd. Ta-ta."

He left the office hastily, fearing reprisals.

Marsh was fortunate in finding Chalmers at his hotel, and the detective read the letter with a faint show of surprise.

"You know all about this, son ?" he asked Marsh. "Well, I should think a local man, who knows the land better than I do—— Oh, but this is as easy as rolling off a log, and I guess Mr. Endicott can trust me to work quietly. Just jot down the cabman's name, the time the train left, and all you know about it. I'll have Miss Bell's address inside of four-and-twenty hours. While you are doing that I'll write to your boss."

This is what Seth Chalmers wrote—

DEAR SIR—I'll do my best for you in the matter of your runaway typist, and I think that I'll locate her in no time. I'm getting pretty full of business picked up on side tracks, which affects you more or less, and shall want an interview with you before this week is out.

Yours obediently

SETH CHALMERS

By the time he had finished his letter and put it into an envelope Marsh was ready for further questions.

"Give this to your boss, son, and that's all," the detective said.

When the lad was gone Chalmers went on with his work of writing a lengthy report to be sent to New York. He always made two careful copies of everything of importance, and was occupied until three o'clock.

He glanced at the clock in his room when the formidable document was sealed and stamped ready for the post.

"I'll have a feed," he decided, "and work on the Bell case. That's only fun for a fool. I guess I can finish it up to-day."

At four o'clock he was at the railway station interviewing the cabman who had brought the ladies from their lodgings. From the cabman he went to the booking clerk, but had to wait for a considerable time for the porter who had handled the luggage, as the man had gone to his tea.

"Five o'clock," he said at last, a note of impatience in his voice. He was thinking of Lumsden and Starkey; he had intended having them shadowed that day. He knew that Lumsden was wanted in the States. "Ah, this must be the man. And he looks rather intelligent for a railway porter."

"You wish to speak to me, sir? My mate has sent me to you."

Chalmers plunged into the subject at once. Yes, the porter remembered the ladies quite well. They went to Birmingham by the 4.40 train, and had got a pile of luggage, five of the pieces being leather trunks. Then there were two large baskets. There would be some excess to pay, but there wasn't time to weigh it at that end.

Chalmers gave the man a shilling and thanked him. A train was just leaving for Birmingham, and he jumped in. Arrived, he traced the Bells and their luggage to the Queen's Hotel, and was back again at Dudley when the church clocks were chiming seven.

He stood irresolute for a minute or two after alighting from the train, then thought—

"No, I guess I'll take it easy till to-morrow." He looked up at the clear sky and the shining moon. "And I'll walk through the castle grounds to the town and have a look at the ruins by moonlight. Then I'll

go to the hotel and get some supper; and perhaps I shall be able to find Mr. Endicott after that. The Bells are safe at the Queen's Hotel for three or four days, anyway."

He turned into the castle grounds at the lower gate, and walked in a leisurely fashion until he came to the courtyard of the ruined castle. He surveyed the decaying grandeur with all an American's enthusiasm, and wandered in and out of the roofless spaces which had once been magnificent banqueting halls and the dwelling-places of princes and nobles.

All at once he heard a movement in the shadows and half turned round, only to be met by a shower of swift blows over the head by some blunt but heavy instrument. He uttered no cry, but fell, limp and senseless, to the moss-covered ground, while his assailant stood over him with flaming eyes and foam-flecked lips.

In his right hand he held a loaded stick, and had raised it to strike the prostrate man again, when he heard the steady tramp of one of the keepers. Silent he stood, with bated breath.

The keeper passed on.

"Dead enough," growled the man, spurning the detective with his foot. "His skull must be beaten in. Time was when I was known as the human catamount. I have not yet lost my activity and skill."

He looked into the ghastly face turned up to the shining moon and laughed.

"Somebody'll find you sooner or later, and let's hope it'll be later. At this time of the year few visitors come to the castle, and you may lie here and rot. But I must go through your clothes and then get away."

Having transferred all the money and papers he could find to his own pockets, the man slunk away into

the darkness, and avoiding frequented ways gained the stone wall which divided the castle grounds from the street.

Here he crouched until he felt sure that there was no one within a hundred yards, then mounting the wall he slid down to the pavement on the other side.

He paused here to light a cigar, used his blood-stained stick to walk with, and murmured jubilantly—

"My luck is not quite out yet. Fancy him positively falling into my arms. It seems almost too good to be true."

CHAPTER XXXIII

"WE MUST LET HIM DO HIS WORST"

Two weeks passed away, and Starkey's works had merged into Endicott & Heathcote's now colossal factory. The effects of the riot had vanished, and every department of the rolling mills, the forges, and the foundries was in full swing.

All the principals concerned in the deal had met, together with their lawyers, at the final signing of the papers, and Mr. Starkey had carried himself jauntily enough right through.

When it was over he watched for an opportunity to speak to Endicott. At last it came, and he drew him aside.

"I suppose that you are satisfied now?" he asked, with one of his sardonic grins. "You've got everything your own way, and I go out without a penny piece. I wish now that I had accepted your original offer."

"Is this all you have to say to me?" Bryan said, coldly.

"Not quite," Starkey answered, viciously. "You have ruined me for the time being."

"Oh, man, you make me tired."

"With all your success you are unhappy, Bryan Endicott. You feel that you are in the shadow of my vengeance."

"Rot! You are like the raving villain in a penny show. Clear out of it, Starkey, and don't bother me any more."

Starkey went away with his lawyer, and later Bryan had to confess that he was not a happy man.

"I believe I am a little afraid of that fellow," he told himself afterwards. "And I'm sure that Vivien is. If I only mention his name she shivers."

He went to Brookdale to dinner that evening. He wanted to tell Vivien that he had taken possession of Greystoke, and that she could see the housekeeper the next day.

"You may want to buy various little things for furnishing that you fancy. You can draw upon me for whatever you think is necessary."

Vivien's face flushed with joy.

"You will take me to Greystoke to-morrow, Bryan," she said, coaxingly.

"No, no; I have wasted too much time already."

"Wasted, Bryan?" she said, reproachfully.

"Well, you know what I mean; I must stick to work for a week or so."

"You are troubled about something, Bryan?"

"Yes. I'm bothered about Mr. Chalmers. Two weeks ago I wrote to him to find Mrs. Bell and her niece, and he answered that he would do it within twenty-four hours. I have not had a word from him since. I have sent to his hotel several times, and the reply is always the same—he has not yet returned. They think nothing of it there. He told them never to be surprised at anything he did. As his luggage is there, and a large amount of money is deposited for safety with the proprietor, the hotel people don't trouble."

"Then why should you, Bryan? It makes me unhappy to see that you are worried. I'm sure that you work far too hard. You are growing nervous and irritable. As for Mrs. Bell and her niece, they've

taken their business into their own hands, and would be sure to resent any further interference."

" Perhaps you are right, Vivien, but I shall never feel that I've done my duty to Miss Bell. And this disappearance of Chalmers is remarkable."

" If he has left anything of value behind he'll come back," Vivien said indifferently.

Silence fell upon them for a while. Dorothy Heathcote was singing and playing to her father. She had a sweet voice and a sympathetic style.

" Shall we go into the garden, dear ? " Vivien asked.

" The night is too cold, isn't it ? Just as you please, after Miss Heathcote has finished the song she is singing. It takes me back to the joys of the camp fire, before I had settled down to work. Those were happy, careless days. Listen ! "

"Oh, come, my beloved, from thy winter abode,
From thy home in the Juba, thy ranch overflowed,
For the waters have fallen, the winter has fled,
And the river once more has returned to its bed.
Then come with me, love, ere the summer's begun,
And the mercury mounts to a hundred and one :
Ere the grass now so green shall be withered and sere—
For you know that our spring's but a month in the year."

Bryan clapped his hands when Dorothy had finished singing.

" That brings back visions of the towering sierras, boundless forests, and snowy mountains, with the red stage-coach winding its way along, crowded with red-shirted passengers. That song brings it all back again."

Vivien looked at him keenly, then her eyes drooped.

" Was that wild life so delightful ? " she asked wistfully.

"I have never known true happiness since."

"That is a poor compliment to pay me, Bryan."

There were tears in her eyes, and her lips quivered.

"I'm sorry if I spoke thoughtlessly, Vivien," he said, gently. "But I think that I should like to revisit the old scenes. You are quite right—I am irritable and overworked, and I want a holiday. Shall we have a honeymoon, after all, and look up the old scenes and friends."

"If you would like it, Bryan, I should also. I only live for your happiness."

This new idea seemed to have taken possession of him all at once, and he described the free and glorious life in the Far West as he had known it ten years earlier, while Vivien smiled rather pathetically.

The next morning she went to Greystoke. She hadn't much heart for the business, and hated to be alone. Despite her marvellous courage, the shadow of Starkey was constantly before her mental vision —his hateful voice in her ears. He had it in his power to wreck her life; but in doing so he would irretrievably be ruined. He had conspired with her to defraud the real Vivien of her rights, and had shared in the spoils. What might then be his fate?

"In the end," she thought, "the very depth of my love for Bryan shall awaken a responsive chord in his heart. He shall love me as I love him, and then I will throw myself on his mercy. I know the grandeur of his nature, and my very weakness will prove to be my strength."

The housekeeper at Greystoke was a very important and pompous lady, and was rather curious about her prospective mistress. It was a sad thing that the old place should pass out of the family completely. Lord Rozenby had been a sore disappointment, but this

was worse and worse. Unless the new mistress met with her distinct approval she would have to resign.

When Vivien arrived she came upon the scene in the great entrance hall, attired in a dress of rustling black silk. A heavy gold chain fell over the bodice, and at the neck was a large gold brooch.

She regarded Miss Lennox severely, and on the spot resolved to resign.

"I've been used to the nobility all my life," she told the butler afterwards, "and can't come down to tradespeople. That person is no lady. Her clothes are in bad taste, and the gold in her hair is only peroxide. She is overdressed and horsey, and spoke to me as though I was dirt."

The butler fondled his mutton-chop whiskers, and pursed up his lips. It had long been understood between them that when the housekeeper did decide to leave Greystoke they were to be married, and take an hotel in Stourbridge. But when this arrangement had been come to, the butler had not seen the new parlour-maid.

"You've been too hasty, Mary," he said, shaking his head. "Why didn't you consult me first? I've promised Lord Rozenby to stay here for another year, if I'm not discharged. You'll have to beg on again, or——"

But the housekeeper sailed away, and the butler smiled.

"She's been too artful for herself this time," he thought complacently. "She's fifty, if she's a day, and the parlour-maid's only four and twenty. Gentlemen that come to first-class hotels want something. attractive behind the bar. The nobility are all stuff. There's few of them got the ooftish. Miss Lennox

looks like a person that can travel without a maid, and's got no use for fainting fits. I'm satisfied."

In the meantime, Miss Lennox was in the library, wondering what to do next, when she saw Lord Rozenby walking across the lawn. She opened a French window and spoke to him. He advanced to meet her, his face flushing. He shook hands, and looked round expectantly, saying—

"Where's Endicott?"

"He has sent me here alone, and I'm quite out of my element. The housekeeper is leaving, I hear, and I'm not going to bother with the servants any more at present. They can all go if they like, and I'll engage a new set."

Rozenby frowned.

"Endicott told me he would be here, and I came to see him. What else are you going to do?"

"Oh, I was to make a list of things which we were to get, but I can't do it by myself," she said petulantly.

"I should think not. By Jove! What a strange chap Endicott is."

Vivien's eyes flashed resentfully; then she remembered that this man was really and deeply in love with her, and she pitied him.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lennox, I only think that Endicott might be a little more considerate of you. There! I'm sure to put my foot in it. When are you returning to Dudley?"

"I think I shall go at once. I have a taxi waiting."

"May I take you back? I have my car here, and your taxi can be dismissed."

Vivien hesitated, and he added—

"I must see Endicott, and I'm passing Heathcote's place."

"Thank you. I think I will go with you."

" I can't disguise my pleasure, Miss Lennox," Rozenby replied.

Ten minutes later they left Greystoke, and very few words passed between them until they were nearing Dudley. Occasionally Rozenby made some remark, but Vivien's replies were curt and brief.

" Are you leaving England soon ? " she asked at last.

" Yes, in a week or two. I intended going next Saturday, but have altered my plans." His brows darkened. " That is what I want to see Endicott about, Miss Lennox.

She did not seem interested.

" I think that I ought to tell you, too. Endicott might forget. He thinks more of those wretched works than of all the world beside."

" If it is anything that I ought to know, Lord Rozenby——"

" It is—it is. I fear that you are not safe from the insane passion which has taken hold of Starkey. He makes no secret of his hatred of you, and he laughs and jibes, until I feel ready to kill the devil. I want to advise Endicott—to advise you—to have him put under restraint. His losses—his disappointments —have affected his brain.

Vivien's face was deadly pale.

" For my sake," she pleaded, " don't trouble Bryan with this nonsense.

" Nonsense ! You call it nonsense ? Have you faith in me, in my friendship, Miss Lennox ? Will you tell me the real extent of this man's power, so that I may know how to deal with him ? He boasts that he can crush you—and through you, crush Endicott. I know that it is utterly absurd, but he has brooded over his defeat until he thoroughly believes it."

Miss Lennox was silent for a few moments; then she said—

"I'm afraid that we must let him do his worst, Lord Rozenby."

He was startled—amazed.

"Then this man really has some hold upon you?" he said, hoarsely.

"Heaven help me, yes, he has!"

There was a break in her voice, and as the car had come to a halt, she held out a trembling hand.

"Good-bye for the present, Lord Rozenby. Miss Heathcote is watching us from the window. I'm grateful for your sympathy, and I feel that you are my sincere friend."

She turned, and went indoors, and Rozenby sat perfectly still for several moments. His face was white, and his eyes flamed with sudden fire. His chauffeur gave an impatient cough.

"Do you wish to go anywhere, my lord?"

"Yes, take me to the devil—anywhere."

CHAPTER XXXIV

A BORN SCOUNDREL

MORTY SCOTT was ill at ease. Why had Mr. Chalmers deceived and disappointed him? Why had he taken away papers which were of such vital importance? He had promised, too, to use his influence with Mr. Endicott, and the days were drifting along.

Mortimer had signed the pledge, and was again his alert, smart self. A few of his old cronies had jeered at him at first, and the loafers who had drunk many a quart of ale at his expense were disgusted. They were amazed that Mortimer Scott could be such a cowardly turncoat. These things were said when Mortimer was well out of hearing.

One day he met Mr. Lumsden in the main street of Tipton, and the hot blood surged into his face. He had been avoiding this man, in obedience to the advice of Chalmers.

Lumsden came straight towards him, an oily smile on his mean face.

"Why, Scott, my boy, I heard that you were very queer. Twice I've called at your house, and your mother has told me you were too bad to be bothered." He looked at Mortimer critically. "There certainly is a change in you."

"Is there?" growled Morty defiantly. And yet he felt that he might spoil something by quarrelling with this man.

Lumsden glanced up and down the street.

"Where can we have a talk? In yonder public-house. There won't be anybody in the private bar at this time. Come along."

Mortimer hesitated for a moment, then followed.

Lumsden sat down at a small table, and motioned him to a seat beside him.

"Two brandies," ordered Lumsden. "Make them both six pennorth's hot, with sugar. The day's beginning to get cool. I know that's your favourite drink, Scott."

"Ginger-beer for me," Scott said "I'm teetotal now."

"What! Don't be a fool, man."

"I don't intend to be any more."

"Oh, please yourself, of course, but I thought that you would have had more stomach in you than to be led by a girl."

"Be careful what you say," glowered Scott, half rising.

"Don't make an ass of yourself."

Lumsden pressed him back into his seat, and Scott realised that this man had muscles of steel. It was a revelation to him.

Lumsden waited until the drinks had been served and the attendant out of the way; then he said—

"I've got a bit of business to talk over with you, Scott, and I want to know when the eighty pounds I agreed to pay you will be due? You have had twenty, if you remember."

"You mean the Starkey affair?"

"Just that, and nothing else. He has made a cat's paw of you, and of me, too. The sooner the job's done the better, because I'm seeking fresh tracks in two or three days' time. I've sold my property, and intend trying my fortunes abroad. Starkey has

ruined my prospects here, and flung us both aside like squeezed sponges. He shall not be left to ride rough-shod over anybody else, and I'd tackle him myself, only that I know he is paying to have me watched."

He bent nearer to Scott's ear.

"Endicott has been kind to me, and I never forget a kindness. He knows that I have robbed him in the most cowardly and treacherous manner; he knows what a rat I am, and he has forgiven me. This is heaping coals of fire on one's head with a vengeance. You have not been one whit better, Scott, only in a smaller degree, and I know that Endicott is ready to take you on again. I tried to run straight, and to settle down, but my opportunity's gone. Now the point is this—I hate Starkey for besting me; you hate him for making a scamp of you. But I loathe him most of all for having it in his power to ruin the life of a man who has been good to us—and he shall never do it, not if I can stop him."

"But he can't!" Scott cried. "What are you getting at?"

"He can and will. You offered me a certain document, and I thought at first that you had become a tool of Starkey's. Do you know that your life was barely worth a moment's purchase? Then I looked at your foolish, drunken face, and threw the miserable concoction of lies at you. It was only a part of Starkey's scheme to leave the rubbish in your room. I explained this as well as I could, and you agreed that Starkey must be stopped for the sake of the only man who has been kind and forgiving to those who robbed and betrayed him. Now, Scott, what have you to say?"

There was a long pause, and the laboured breathing of the men filled the small room. They stared into each other's eyes.

"If I was drunk now," said Mortimer Scott, "I should do for Starkey, or be done myself; but I'm sober, and I mean to keep sober, so there's an end of it. You've made me feel a bad sort of rascal, Mr. Lumsden, and I'll devote my life to proving that I ain't."

Lumsden opened the door, and peeped out.

"Curse it," he muttered, savagely. "I'm being shadowed now. There's a little man with a red moustache on the opposite side of the street. How can I get a chance at Starkey? And I must warn Mr. Endicott. I must prove to him that I'm grateful."

He turned, and strode out of the bar, without deigning to look at or speak to Scott again.

Mortimer thought that he might come back, but he didn't, and the young fellow went home, feeling very much perplexed and miserable.

He told something of the meeting to Maggie Cornforth that evening, and wondered why Mr. Chalmers kept so silent.

"I told you about that paper with things in it that meant trouble for Mr. Endicott and Miss Lennox? Well, Lumsden says it's all bogey, and I'm glad of it. Still, if the detective, as he calls himself, doesn't turn up before the wedding, I shall feel it my duty to tell the young guv'nor."

Maggie looked at him brightly, and smiled.

"You will have a letter from Mr. Endicott to-morrow, Morty," she said.

"Are you sure?" he asked, eagerly.

"Positive. Marsh showed it to me when he was taking the letters to post."

"I shall have no rest till I get it. I'll take a labourer's job at half wages, and work like a slave for him."

He walked home with Maggie, and after saying good night, went for a long stroll. He felt that he could not sleep until he had seen what Mr. Endicott had written to him.

"I wonder if I'm a real bad fellow at heart," he reflected, miserably. "Lumsden made me feel that I am. It's a marvel I ain't picking oakum. And yet, I'll swear I never meant to go wrong. I simply got silly on one question."

He came to a standstill in his ponderings, and suddenly realized that a man was advancing upon him with quick, catlike steps. It was nearly midnight, and the moon was almost hidden by a bank of black clouds.

Scott cast a quick glance round. He was half a mile from any habitation, and standing within a couple of yards of a canal, whose sluggish waters gleamed dully in the night. Behind him the bank was steep, and sloped forty or fifty feet to a bed of jagged cinders.

He clenched his big fists, and set his teeth hard. Was the fellow going to attack him? Well, if he wanted a fight, he should have one, and a good one, too.

All at once the man halted, and Mortimer backed from before his blazing eyes.

"Mr. Lumsden!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE LAST LETTER

For the first time in his life Bryan Endicott was suffering from a nervous depression. His nights were restless, and he awoke in the morning with a swimming, aching brain. He endured this for two days, and then sent for a doctor. The doctor was a blunt old practitioner. No talking for effect.

"You want rest, change of scene, change of air, and relief from worry. You have a splendid constitution, but you are only human, like other men. You must leave your work to take care of itself, and go away—anywhere, for a month or two. A tonic is all the medicine I can give you. You know what is on your mind—I don't; but whatever it is, get rid of it."

When the doctor was gone, Bryan carefully interviewed himself.

"Now let me see what is the matter with you. You are a success from a worldly point of view, and you have achieved fame and fortune, but you are not happy, not even satisfied. You are going to be married to a woman who is passionately attached to you—a woman whom you ought to love for the sake of the old days, but you don't. She does not satisfy you, and it would be a kindness to her, and more particularly to yourself, to tell her so. Yes, you will be married within a few days now, and must go abroad as the doctor orders you, but the prospect offers not an atom of pleasure."

These were the thoughts that raced through his mind, while sitting at the window of his hotel. It was evening, and he heard the clocks chiming the hour of seven. The gas lamps flickered in the streets, and the air seemed to be chill. Scores of labouring men were toiling homewards, smiles on their faces, jests on their tongues.

"They have homes, and someone to care for them," he thought.

He picked up an open letter that lay on the table, and read it listlessly. He knew the contents already, for it had reached him by the morning post.

DEAREST BRYAN—I went to Greystoke as you wished, but my heart was not in the task, and I have scored a failure. The housekeeper, a most objectionable person, began by patronizing me, and after certain impertinences, resigned. I really don't think it advisable to keep old servants. One must be master or mistress in one's own household. That is about the extent of my doings. I could not possibly make that list by myself, and it must wait until we return from our honeymoon. Then again, I was interrupted by Lord Rozenby. He came expecting to find you at Greystoke, and as you were not there he brought me home in his car. I hoped to see you this evening, but you did not come. I am hungrily watching and waiting. Shall I see you to-morrow, darling?

With love eternal

VIVIEN

"I ought to go," Bryan thought. "I suppose I must, but I don't feel like it."

He dropped the window blind, and turned to answer a knock on the door. One of the waiters stood in the doorway, and behind him a tall, dark figure.

"This gentleman wishes to see you, sir," the man said. "He insisted upon following me up here," he added, apologetically.

But the man pushed him aside, and Endicott said, with something like a gasp—

"Mr. Chalmers! Good heavens, what is the matter with you, man?"

Chalmers walked into the room, and sat down. His face was white and thin, and his head was swathed in bandages.

"Not much," answered the detective. "I've only been slaughtered." He smiled cheerfully. "Left for dead—loss of memory for a couple of weeks, and here I am."

Bryan was speechless for a while.

"Go ahead with the story," he said, at last; "if you can, that is. Have something to drink—something to stimulate you. Why, man, you are a living skeleton. Was it wise to come here to-night. Why didn't you send for me, if you must see me."

"When is your marriage to be?"

Bryan was surprised at the question, but he answered—

"Over a week yet."

"Thank you," said Chalmers. "I think I will have something. The doctor says that sherry won't hurt me."

Bryan went to the sideboard, and poured out a large glass full, saying—

"This is good. A business friend made me a present of a case. The famous Xeres sherry."

The American sipped it cautiously.

"I'm not quite used to your straight drinks yet, but this is running around like molten fire. To-morrow I'm going to treat myself to a champagne cocktail, and you must join me."

"I will—I give my promise. Now fire away with your story. Here, have the easy chair, you don't look comfortable."

Chalmers shifted his position, and said—

"Here, sir, listen to this. I won't waste words, because I feel pretty mean, and I've got a taxi waiting. You asked me to follow up Mrs. Bell and her niece. I did so, the very same day. They were located at the Queen's Hotel, Birmingham. That was slick work, and I came back to Dudley in the evening. I thought I'd look at the castle ruins by moonlight, and while I was looking I got forty-seven bashes on the head —more or less. I never knew who hit me. I was just pulverized out of time, and the man who did it took my money, watch, papers—cleaned me right out, in fact. I was picked up next morning by a keeper, the police were sent for, and after being monkeyed about by a surgeon I was sent to the hospital, where I've been until to-day. Nobody knew who I was, and I heard nobody responded to the press description of me."

"I haven't seen any," said Bryan."

"I guess they put in a two-line notice, set up in diamond type, and forgot to ink that corner of the form. Provincial papers are holy terrors, but here I am, sir."

"And I'm glad of it, Chalmers. I have worried a lot about you. Have you no idea who tried to do for you?"

"I have suspicions, that's all. Now, sir, if you will be so kind as to go with me to my hotel, and vouch for me to the hospital official, I'll be much obliged. I'm expecting to find work enough to last me a month."

Seth Chalmers was not far wrong. There were half a dozen telegrams, and a score of letters, British and foreign.

"Sit right there, Mr. Endicott, and smoke one of

my cigars, while I scramble through these; then I may have something to say to you."

He tore open a telegram, read it, and muttered—

"The original business I came to Europe for this trip is done. The criminal's committed suicide."

He read his telegrams and letters, giving vent to a running fire of comment, which was both original and amusing so far as his single auditor was concerned. Already the colour was coming back into his face, and the fire into his eyes. Suddenly he stared at Endicott and chuckled.

"They're in New York now. What in all-fired creation are they doing there? And why should our office be making inquiries about them? And just imagine it coming through me."

Bryan waited for him to explain.

"I mean Mrs. and Miss Bell. I'm directed here to report fully on their antecedents, and to do it mighty quick, too. And the address of some lawyer is sent to me to investigate."

"You amaze me," said Bryan. "I hope they are not in trouble."

"Might be stuck for money, and held by the police."

Bryan jumped up.

"Cable a hundred—five hundred pounds——"

"Gently—gently, sir. I was only surmising. Wait till I've seen this lawyer. What's his address? Farley, Corporation Street, Birmingham. I'll be there in the morning, ten o'clock, sharp.

"If you are not strong enough——" Bryan began.

"I'll do it, sir; I must do it. I'm dazed out of my reckoning. I haven't been very sick bodily. It was the loss of memory that kept me back. I know that you're anxious, and if you'll meet me here to-morrow,

say at three o'clock, I'll tell you all about the two ladies—that is, if I don't get knocked out again."

Bryan Endicott saw him to bed, and arranged with a doctor to attend to him, and then returned to his own hotel.

He woke early next morning, and the first thing he did was to write to Vivien—

My Dear Vivien—Pardon my seeming neglect. I intended coming to see you last evening, but what do you think happened? The American appeared on the scene, more dead than alive. It appears that he was attacked by someone, a footpad, probably, half killed, and robbed, and until yesterday he was in hospital. But I will tell you all about it when I see you to-night. I have been confoundedly seedy, but I feel more like myself this morning. A strong, healthy fellow always makes a fuss over a trifling ailment. I have quite decided upon a sea voyage, and shall revisit places dear to me in America. The charm and the novelty will appeal to you, too.

With love

Bryan

P.S.—I have news of Miss Bell.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE TRUTH AT LAST

BRYAN posted his letter to Vivien Lennox on his way to business. He also thought that he had better look up Seth Chalmers, and see how he was progressing. It was fortunate that he did so, for the excitement of the previous evening had brought on a mental collapse, or something very near to it.

It was barely eight o'clock when he walked into the hotel, and the manager met him with a face expressing deep concern.

"Mr. Chalmers is very weak, sir, and the doctor insists upon complete rest. And yet he persists in saying that he is going out."

"Take me to him," Bryan said.

When he walked into Chalmers' bedroom, that determined individual was trying to struggle into his trousers, and reeling about like a drunken man. His mind was obviously wandering too.

"That cable is days old now, and I must attend to it. Don't talk like a fool, doctor. The happiness of a good many people is in my hands."

"I'm not the doctor, Chalmers. Don't you know me? Here, old chap, get back into bed; I'll do your business for you."

Chalmers looked dazed, then he sighed.

"Mr. Endicott! Well, if this isn't enough to make a hen laugh." He closed his eyes, and raised one hand to his head. "I was going silly again. Yes, I'll lie

down, and you shall see the Birmingham lawyer. It concerns you more than anyone else, or you may string me up for a horse thief. Don't notice my way of talking to you. It's like a breath of home to see you and hear you speak, and I fall into my natural ways. There's the authority of my firm, there's my badge, and my letter of credit. Now, off you go, and bring me a clean report. I want rest, that's all."

He let Bryan assist him back to bed, took the sedative ordered by the doctor, and in five minutes was sound asleep.

Bryan left the hotel with a springing step and a buoyant heart. At last he would be able to help Miss Bell, and perhaps find out why she had gone away so suddenly and mysteriously. He went to the works, and hurried through the letters with feverish impatience. Chalmers had said that the cable was days old.

At ten o'clock Mortimer Scott called in answer to a letter, and stood in the corridor, his jaw square set, and his heavy brows drawn close together.

He was admitted to Mr. Endicott's room, and when Bryan shook hands with him he nearly broke down.

"I've come to offer myself as a labourer, sir, or anything," he said. "I want to prove to you how repentant I am, an' how faithful I can be."

"You will take your old place, Scott, as foreman of the casting shop. I never had a better workman, or a better manager of men, until——"

"Don't talk about that, sir."

"You will go back to work next Monday."

Bryan rose and drew on his gloves.

"Thank you, sir. One word more afore I go. The gentleman named Chalmers did a lot for me, but he seems to be gone——"

"No, he came back yesterday."

Scott's face brightened.

"And there's Lumsden, sir. I think he's gone off his dot. He's ragin' about, lookin' for trouble, an' he talks of doin' for all your enemies. I met him last night, and I can see he's mad. If he comes here, be careful of him, sir."

"I'm very sorry for any man who goes wrong, Scott, because he is only making misery for himself. I would not raise a finger to punish Lumsden, but I can never again have anything to do with him. Good morning."

Five minutes later Bryan was walking with vigorous steps in the direction of Tipton railway station. He was fortunate enough to catch a through train to Birmingham, and hoped that luck would continue to favour him.

Short as is the distance from New Street Station to Corporation Street, he took a taxi, so anxious was he to kill time and space.

Arrived at the lawyer's office, he sent in his card, and was invited into a reception-room.

Mr. Farley was a lawyer of the eminently respectable type. His manner was gentle, almost purring; his tone was soft and plausible, and his white hands were constantly folding and unfolding themselves, one over the other.

"I am charmed to make your acquaintance, Mr. Endicott. Your name and fame are not unknown to me."

He wondered if the young ironmaster were likely to become a client.

"I am here, Mr. Farley, in the interests of a Mrs. Bell and her niece. I understand that you act for Mrs. Bell."

The lawyer's eyelids fluttered, and he bowed.

"You are aware, sir, that the lady is abroad—in America?"

"Quite aware of it, sir." Mr. Farley was growing cautious.

"Well, to come to the point at once, I'm afraid that Mrs. and Miss Bell are in some kind of trouble. An inquiry about them has come through Pinkerton's agency, and their man on this side has been referred to you. I know this man, and as he is unable at the moment to call upon you, I have come in his stead. Here are his vouchers."

"H'm! And why should you interest yourself in these ladies, Mr. Endicott?"

"Miss Bell was employed in my office. She rendered me a signal service, for which she has received no recognition, and I am anxious to render the ladies any aid they may need."

Mr. Farley's manner changed, and he leaned towards his visitor.

"Mr. Endicott, the Bells are eminently respectable, though poor. The elder lady has an annuity of a hundred a year, which she receives through me. Her husband was a distinguished officer in the British army, and the lady herself is above reproach. I should imagine that it is a very ordinary inquiry. There are hundreds of such every day, and I do not anticipate anything out of the usual. I advanced the lady fifty pounds before she left England, and she and her niece had fully that amount in hand besides."

"You have their address?"

"Oh, yes. I insisted that it should be cabled to me, because I am in a measure responsible for my client, Mrs. Bell, and she is by no means a woman of the world."

"Will you give it to me? I am going to the States

very soon, and I would very much like to pay a visit, just of courtesy."

The lawyer hesitated.

"It's rather irregular, but—" —he scribbled a few words on a scrap of paper, and handed it to Bryan. —"I'm sure that you will not abuse my confidence."

"Washington Hotel, Broadway," read Bryan, a strange thrill at his heart. He rose to leave.

"One minute, Mr. Endicott," said Mr. Farley. "Half a confidence is no confidence at all. Perhaps I ought to tell you that Miss Bell's correct name is not Edith Bell, but Vivien Lennox. She is really cousin to the lady who is soon to be your wife, if report speaks true."

Bryan stared at the lawyer.

"I see that this is news to you."

"It is, indeed." He resumed his seat. "Go on, Mr. Farley."

"Miss Vivien Lennox was the daughter of a clergyman who added to his income by teaching at King Edward's Grammar School."

"Yes. I know all about that—I was one of the boys. I want to hear about the other Miss Lennox—the one who calls herself Miss Bell."

"This is the one."

Bryan jumped to his feet.

"Then who the deuce am I supposed to be marrying?" he shouted.

"Her cousin—the daughter of the uncle—her father's elder brother, George Lennox, of California."

Bryan clasped his head between his hands.

"Wait a bit," he said. "I'm completely dazed. I never knew that there were two Viviens. I heard that Mr. Lennox's father had left a large fortune, and that the shock of being lifted from poverty to wealth had been too much for him."

"He took possession of his father's fortune, but Miss Lennox, from California—the lady who is to be your wife—came upon the scene, and successfully claimed everything. This was the shock that killed him."

"I see," said Bryan, feebly, and after a long silence. "And I'm in the midst of people who must know everything, and have never heard a word of it."

The lawyer was amused.

"You have told me the truth?" Bryan asked.

"The truth, and nothing but the truth," smiled Mr. Farley.

"I'm glad I came to see you, Mr. Farley," he said, quietly. "Good morning."

He went back to Dudley at a furious pace, and yet he felt like a man in a dream.

Seth Chalmers was just waking from a long and refreshing sleep when Endicott entered his room. In a few words he told the detective the amazing story, and the detective grinned.

"Now listen to mine, Mr. Endicott. You are going to marry a perfect fraud—at least, you were. Miss Lennox, of California, was George Lennox's adopted daughter. I remember him very well, and the girl too. Your friend, Starkey, has engineered this swindle, and has fattened upon it. He hopes to continue fattening. After your marriage he intended to blackmail your wife, and finally expose her to you—if nobody else did. That was to be his crowning piece of villainy and revenge."

Bryan shivered. How near he had been to the edge of a precipice.

"You can send your report, Chalmers, but make no mention of anything else. I sail for New York to-morrow."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" chuckled the American.

CHAPTER XXXVII

SWEETHEARTS AGAIN

BRYAN'S next move was to telegraph to Mr. Heathcote and Lord Rozenby. The latter was staying with friends at Stourbridge. The wires were worded alike—

See me at Dudley Arms Hotel as soon as possible. Very urgent.—ENDICOTT

Then he went to his room, and began to pack his steamer trunk. He had no wish to be hampered with luggage, and took only what was absolutely necessary.

In the midst of these operations Mr. Heathcote came puffing and blowing into the room.

"Bless my life, Bryan!" he exclaimed, mopping his hot face. "What on earth's the matter now? That telegram gave me a deuce of a shock."

"I'm going to New York," Bryan answered. "And I must leave for Liverpool to-night or I shall miss the boat."

Mr. Heathcote sat down and gasped.

"New York? What about the wedding? You shall not serve Miss Lennox in this way. I won't be a party to such disgraceful conduct."

"There will be no wedding, Heathcote, and I am sending a brief note to Miss Lennox. I will either post it or you can take it. There it lies, open on the table. Read it."

The note ran—

I am leaving to-night for New York to find the real Vivien Lennox. My heart is full of pity for you. Need I say more?

BRYAN ENDICOTT

"Good Lord!" cried Mr. Heathcote. "There'll be a scene. I shall clear out and leave it to Dolly. You don't mean that she's an impostor? What is to become of the poor creature?"

"She is no ordinary woman, Mr. Heathcote. She has been playing a big game under the tutorship of Starkey. It's all as plain as daylight to me now. Miss Lennox was the adopted daughter of George Lennox, of California. She has not a particle of title to the fortune she has got hold of. Then Starkey schemed to marry her, but she rebelled, and, I believe, became really fond of me. The true Vivien Lennox, the sweetheart of my boyhood, was, in the meanwhile, working for her living as Miss Bell. In fact, no other than our typist, Miss Edith Bell. I am going to find her."

Just at the moment Lord Rozenby stepped quietly into the room. His face was deadly pale, but his eyes were steady.

"Endicott," he said, "I have been standing in the doorway, and have heard every word from the point where you said there would be no wedding. It seemed so horrible, so incredible, that I was almost stupefied. Now I understand, and shall esteem it a favour if you will let me deliver your note to Miss Lennox. Do you know that in a sense I am very glad of this? You never cared for the poor girl, and the result in any case would have been bad. You know that I love her and that I shall stand by her till the last."

"After all this?" gasped Heathcote.

"Yes, sir," was the stern reply. "She knows that I have loved her for a long time—long before Endicott came upon the scene, and now I rejoice that there is this chance of laying my life at her feet."

He took up the note and strode away without another word, and both Heathcote and Endicott gave a sigh of relief.

. . . . .

Just eight days later Bryan Endicott was walking along Chambers Street, New York, like one who was not exactly a stranger to the great city. He carried his suitcase in his hand, hardly realizing how heavy it was, so varied were his emotions.

Upon reaching Broadway, he turned to the right, then crossed over to City Hall Park to sit down for a few moments and decide upon his future movements.

He turned his eyes towards the Washington Hotel, and his heart bounded joyously—expectantly.

The minutes passed, and seizing his case again, he decided he could not do better than take rooms at the Washington himself.

He interviewed the clerk, and, while registering, turned back the pages of the register until he saw the names of Mrs. and Miss Bell. As the clerk's sharp eyes were following his movements he looked up and smiled, saying—

"These ladies are still here? They are friends of mine, and I want to give them a surprise."

"Yes, sir, but they are out now. They boarded an up-town car. I guess you'll find 'em in Central Park. The young lady is very fond of the park, and goes there every day as a rule. Mrs. Bell isn't so struck with the park, but she's gone as well to-day."

"Thank you very much," responded Bryan.

He went to the room assigned to him, had a wash and a change of clothes, and then strolled out into the bustling, teeming street.

One minute he stood irresolute. It was barely eleven o'clock, and as the day was very fine and warm Miss Bell would not in all probability be back for some time.

He boarded the next car and was whirled up town, his blood racing like wildfire through every artery and vein of his system. He might see Vivien at any moment, or he might walk about the magnificent park for hours. Still he would take his chance. Anything was better than inactivity.

Leaving the car he went in the direction of the Belvedere, one of the most beautiful places in Central Park, keenly scanning the face and figure of every lady whom he passed. He paused for a few moments at the lake, and then continued towards the Ramble.

The seductive strains of "Annie Rooney" floated on the clear air. The same old organ had ground out the same old tune to the whirling of the roundabout twelve long years since. And he had stood in the selfsame spot penniless and unknown.

He looked mentally over the gulf of time, and saw a slender, blue-eyed maiden, and heard her glad young voice calling "Bryan—Bryan."

"Vivien—Vivien," he murmured. "My love for you has only been sleeping."

Then he slackened his pace and listened. Vivien's voice was calling him yet. He heard a quick step behind him, a gasping little sob, and the sweetheart of his boyhood was clasped in his arms.

"Vivien—Vivien!"

. . . . .

The New York papers published the whole of the story. They were bound to do so, because so much was concerned with Americans. And there was much more to come, although a great deal had been anticipated.

"I knew that you were coming, Bryan," Vivien said, an hour later. "My aunt knew it—every one knew it." She blushed hotly. "And I am amazed the reporters did not meet you when you landed. Two days since the story was told by the 'New York Herald.' I have a copy here."

Then Endicott read what was of startling and terrible interest to him.

Miss Lennox from California had married Lord Rozenby and gone abroad with him. Mr. Starkey had been found in the old works with his skull smashed in, and beside him Mr. Lumsden, a bullet in his brain. Lumsden had killed Starkey with a loaded stick and then shot himself. A quantity of powerful explosives was found about with which he had intended to wreck the works.

"So it was Lumsden who tried to kill Seth Chalmers," thought Bryan. "The doctors said that he had been beaten insensible with a loaded stick."

He turned, and kissed Vivien fondly.

"We will follow your aunt to the hotel, sweetheart mine, and face the newspaper men. It is almost certain that we are being shadowed for the final scoop."

. . . . .

Bryan and Vivien were at Greystoke when the complete story was told to the world. The wedding had been a pretty but simple one, and there were

several names familiar to the New World among the guests—one of whom was Seth Chalmers. Dorothy Heathcote had been one of the bridesmaids, and the most indefatigable of workers. This sweet-natured woman was never so happy as when she was striving for the happiness of others.

And among the donors of wedding gifts were Captain Colain, Maggie Cornforth, Morty Scott, Mason (the timekeeper), Marsh, and last, but not least, a magnificent pearl necklace and a diamond brooch from Lord and Lady Rozenby.

Printed by Jarrold & Sons Ltd. Norwich